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## Lost People Matter to God

September 11, 2022

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TEXT: Luke 15:1-10 (ESV)

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 ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? 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 have 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 ninety-nine 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 have 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."

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Many of us regularly lose things: keys, wallets, TV remotes, purses, eyeglasses, phones, bills, and paperwork. And we spend a lot of time searching for them. For instance, I lost my credit card after a trip to the grocery store recently. I conducted an all-out, panicked search for an hour, driving back to the store, searching the parking lot, searching my car, turning the house upside down. And I finally did find it in a very silly place: inside a shoe. I was so relieved, though. It really bothers me when I lose things. I read somewhere that the average person misplaces nine things a day and spends an average of 15 minutes a day looking for lost items. I believe it.

Today's passage has two lost and found stories that were told by Jesus in response to criticisms of him from the religious establishment, the Pharisees, who were the holy

pious men of the day, and the scribes who were the law experts. They didn't like the company Jesus was keeping. You see, Jesus attracted and welcomed all kinds of people. And He also went to all kinds of people, old and young, rich and poor, male and female, Jew and non-Jew, religious and non-religious, respectable and not respectable, the insiders of society and the outcasts of society. Well, we're told in today's passage that tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear Jesus. The tax collectors were especially hated by their fellow citizens because they were considered crooks. They overcharged their own people in collecting taxes in order to line their own pockets for profit. They were considered traitors as well because they were working for the Romans, who had taken over Israel. Sinners were the immoral, the lowlifes, those of questionable character who plagued society. Also, those who were nonreligious and wouldn't follow ceremonial law might have been in that group. There might have been a few sick people and afflicted in this crowd, for they were oftentimes viewed as being punished by God for some awful sin they must have done.

Have you ever wondered, though, what it was that attracted them to draw near to Jesus and listen to him? Was it his acceptance of them – perhaps – that he showed an interest in them? We know he did. Or maybe they had heard of or witnessed his miracles. And so, they were just curious what this man had to say. Or maybe there were even two or three in the bunch that were looking for a change in their lives, wanted to get back on track with God. We don't really know. But they came and he received them. And what we do know is that as they drew near, the religious elite of Israel were horrified and critical that Jesus would allow them to do that. “This man receives sinners and eats with them,” they grumbled to each other. The thinking was if Jesus is truly a holy person of God, as He says, a good spiritual leader, He should know better than to mingle with unholy, unclean types. He could be infected and become unclean himself by keeping company with them. He should be thinking of as reputation and credibility in society.

Jesus, upon overhearing their grumbling, responded to them by telling two parables which make quite clear his reasons for building these relationships with unsavory types. These stories actually display the heart of God. “What man of you having 100 sheep,” Jesus said, “if he has lost one of them does not leave the 99 and go after the one who is lost until he finds it?” So we have a shepherd missing a sheep. He doesn't want to lose a single sheep, especially if he is the owner of that sheep. He said, Jesus is saying, which one of you wouldn't go looking for that lost sheep until you found it? And he'd leave the 99 out in the open country, probably in the care of other shepherds. And he'd

search for that lost sheep until he found it. And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing, perhaps carrying it because the sheep is too weak at this point to walk on its own. Of course, the shepherd is thrilled and he's rejoicing all the way home, his lost sheep's found. But he doesn't stop there when he arrives at home, he's so happy that he throws a party to celebrate the recovery of the sheep. All the neighbors in his village are invited to join him in his rejoicing.

And then Jesus points out to his critics, Just so I tell you, there will be more joy in Heaven over one center who repents, turns to God, than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance. Just as the Shepherd rejoices greatly and throws a great party over a sheep, so, God, the Great Shepherd rejoices with his angels. When a sinner, a lost soul who has been far away from him, is recovered and brought home. God parties with his angels when that happens. And Jesus said he takes great joy in that more than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance. Jesus is saying that – tongue in cheek – as he talks about those 99. It's a bit of sarcasm or irony. Maybe it's aimed at those grumbles who think they're already right with God because of their personal goodness and religiosity, and therefore they see no need to repent and come to Jesus for His forgiveness and salvation.

And then Jesus told another parable, following the same outline about a coin that got lost. “What woman, having ten silver coins if she loses one, doesn't light a lamp and sweep the house and diligently look for it until she finds it. And when she's found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I'd lost.’” And again, Jesus said, “Just so I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Now there are three common threads in these lost and found stories Jesus told. Each one, first of all, tells us something valuable missing from its owners, valuable enough to merit an all-out search. The sheep was valuable. The coin was valuable. Next, each item was described as being lost. Unable to get back to its owner on its own, the sheep had nibbled itself, lost, mindlessly moving from one inviting tuft of green grass to the next until it was far away from its owner. It didn't even recognize it was lost or in danger of being attacked and destroyed by predators against which it was totally helpless. And of course, the coin was helplessly lost because it was inanimate. And then finally, when each lost item was found, there was great rejoicing and celebration by the owner and he invited others to join with him in that rejoicing. And Jesus then concludes at the end of

each parable, “Just so, I tell you, that's what happens among God and His angels when a lost sinner is reunited with God by coming to me.” Here's the core truth that Jesus is communicating here, and I don't want you to miss this, so listen up. **Lost people matter to God.** Jesus is saying in response to the criticism being leveled at him, “That's why I'm here building these relationships with these people you look down on and have written off. I'm carrying out my father's will by going after lost people because they matter to God. He rejoices every time he gets someone back. And I long to bring my father joy.” Jesus is on a search and rescue mission. That's what he's saying. A search and rescue mission to bring lost people home to the God who loves them and doesn't want a single one of them lost. And this rescue mission will ultimately be accomplished at the cross by Jesus for loss. Sinners like us.

This story, then, about the grumbling Pharisees and Jesus's response to them does two things for me as I consider it. First, it makes my heart sing “Hallelujah. Amen!” Lost people matter to God. That this grumbling of the Pharisees is, in essence, great news. Jesus receives sinners and eats with them, even fellowships with them. And I'm so glad he does, because the truth is, I'm a sinner. I was born a sinner, a rebel against God, standing in need of forgiveness and a reconciled relationship with Him who created me and loves me but hates my sin. And before Jesus Christ entered this world on his search and rescue mission, I was helplessly, hopelessly lost from God because of my sin. So were you. We were all outcasts before God. Before Jesus. But here's the good news. Jesus entered the world to bring us back home to God. He died on a cross to pay for our sins in order to rescue people like you and me from perishing in our lostness. He is the good shepherd who lay down his life for the sheep in order to open the way for us to have a new, eternal relationship with God forever. Jesus tells us that when a sinner repents, which means simply turning away from the old way of thinking and doing things and turning to Jesus in faith, God rejoices and receives us with open arms. For some reason, beyond our finite comprehension, God loved and valued me enough to go on an all-out search and rescue effort to bring us back home to himself. And so, as the Apostle Paul joyfully boasts, “God shows His love for us. And while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” So I'm glad – I'm so glad – God is committed to finding lost people because I'd be lost in perishing if he wasn't. He went to a great deal of trouble to make you and me his own. And because of that, I can sing from the bottom of my heart: “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found. Was blind, but now I see.”

What about you? Have you been able to sing those words from the bottom of your heart, and in testimony to what he's done in your life? Have you been found and tasted God's grace and forgiveness and promises? Or as God still searching, waiting on you? It doesn't need to be like that, you know. You can turn to Christ. He's looking for you. When you turn to him, asking for forgiveness, he promises to receive you. And you will be among the found. And there will be great joy and a celebration in Heaven over you. And if you have come home, thank God along with me for his amazing grace in your life.

Now, remember I said this text does two things to me. The second thing it does is it challenges me. These parables explain why this pursuit meant so much to Jesus. He knew that rescue was possible. And love for the father as well as for the lost, compelled him to go all out to rescue the perishing. So as his followers, can we do any less if lost people matter to God? And it brings Him such joy when they're rescued and brought back. Would it not make sense then that I, in grateful response is a found person in Christ, would also care about lost people, and go after them in Christ's name, because they matter to God, they matter to me? If Christ's attitude and perspective possesses such thinking about lost persons, so should ours as his rescued followers. This passage reminds the forgiven and the found that we are called to take action and to join Christ in his search and rescue mission. Heaven wants us to go on an all-out search for those who need Jesus and to be willing to do whatever it takes to bring them home. He wants us to pursue, not ignore the lost or isolate themselves from them. We're not to be a holy huddle guarding ourselves from the sinful world, but out there searching, ready to testify to what God in Christ has done for all people. We rub shoulders with unbelievers and build relationships with those who might be considered unsavory to us. Why? In order to befriend them and bring them to Christ. It's to be a priority that we build friendships and bring good news to unbelievers so that they might eventually turn to Jesus in faith. And that brings God joy.

It's not an easy task. We see in these parables a great deal of effort, time and energy, being expended by the shepherd and the woman in order to recover that which was lost. So, it requires a big commitment to Jesus in the Gospel. It's a daily commitment to be on lookout for lost people. It involves praying for God to use you and to help you see the lost. It means letting go of your own prejudices and judgments and choosing to try to see people as God sees them, stepping forward to love them in Christ's name. It means a willingness to spend time building relationships with people you don't share

values with. It's praying for lost people, asking for the Holy Spirit to open the doors of their hearts and give you the courage in the right words to say to them about Jesus what they need to hear. In our fast-moving and busy culture. I know it's hard developing such relationships, so perhaps the best opportunities might come during lunches, at work or school contacts or neighbors or athletic functions that we or our kids are involved in. In each case, opportunities do exist that can lead to some deep relationships. And we do this always keeping in mind the joy and pleasure it brings our Heavenly Father when one of these lost ones are brought back home to His loving care.

So that's the message for today, to take heart in and to faithfully follow. As one who was lost, but now I'm found, I am to be about the task of pursuing those who need to be found and rescued by his grace. And let us be glad for this great news and trust in it fully that lost people matter to God. And let us be faithful to this holy calling. If lost people matter to God, let them also matter to us. Let's pray. Lord, thank you for helping us to see you and your loving and gracious heart today. Help us to hold these words of Jesus constantly in our minds and glory in them. And may they move those of us who follow the risen Jesus to join Him in His search and rescue mission. Amen.