



Have you ever wondered if God is joyful? When you think of God, what kind of emotions do you associate with him? Is he a frowning God? Is he ultra serious? Is his normal disposition to be angry and upset? I think some of us have a hard time thinking of God as joyful, happy and pleased. I'm not a big fan of smiley faces found on bumper stickers or at the end of a text message. But the more I read the Bible the more convinced I am that God feels all the emotions we feel. Of course he feels pain, anger and disappointment. The Bible even tells us not to grieve the Holy Spirit of God. There's a sense in which our choices can hurt God. But, at the same time, the Bible also describes God as joyful.

We know when God created the heavens and the earth he looked at it all and "saw that it was good." I think there was joy in that. God delighted in his creation and he wants his creation to enter into that joy. Psalm 68:8 says, "*The whole earth is filled with awe at your wonders; where morning dawns, where evening fades, you call forth songs of joy.*" How could God call forth songs of joy if he didn't have joy?

Nehemiah told the exiles who'd returned to Jerusalem and were grieved over their own sin: "*Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength*" (Nehemiah 8:10b).

Even Jesus, on the night of his betrayal, a very sad night indeed, could talk about his joy. He said to his disciples, "*I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete*" (John 15:11). And then a little later he prayed to his Father for his disciples, "*...that they may have the full measure of my joy within them*" (John 17:13).

Paul wrote the Thessalonians and said, "*You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit*" (1 Thessalonians 1:6).

God has joy and he gives joy. The question is, What makes God joyful? What causes God to rejoice, celebrate and even laugh? For many of us, our walk with God has become boring and routine; we've lost a sense of joyful adventure in our Christian life. How can we correct that? The answer is found in two little parables Jesus shared in Luke 15. These stories tell us both what grieves God and what fills him with joy. It also tells us why so often we're not in tune with the heart of God. Why is it sometimes we're sad and he's happy, or he's sad and we're happy?

## The Joylessness of Human Pride

The two stories are born out of a situation of conflict and tension.

**Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:1-2).**

Jesus is surrounded by the wrong kind of people here. Tax collectors weren't the official servants of the government like today. They were private Jewish entrepreneurs hired by the Romans. They made their money primarily through overcharging and extortion. They were despicable people; moral degenerates. This is also true of the people described here as "sinners." This was a term used for those who lived lives openly rebellious to the law of God. Often they were engaged in work that was dishonorable and immoral. If we were to look at this through 20th century eyes we'd see a few drug dealers, the owner of an adult book store, maybe a stripper. Whatever they did, these weren't the kind of people you'd want your son or daughter to date! But these were the ones who Jesus attracted and who "gathered around to hear Jesus."

Standing by and watching all this with their eyebrows raised and arms folded over their chest were the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. These were the most law abiding and respectable citizens of that day. These were people like most of us who took their religion seriously. They prayed for their nation to return to God and his word. So you can understand why this was a problem for them. Not only did Jesus welcome them, he ate with them! In that culture when you sat down to eat with someone it was a sign of acceptance, friendship and even honor. These weren't people he met with occasionally to see if he could persuade them to change their ways; these were his friends! That's why they muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

It's like how would you react if you were walking down Laurel Street in San Carlos one night and you peeked into one of the bars and there I was, surrounded with people who looked very at home there? There were a few guys who looked like they just hopped off their Harley's parked in front of the bar. There were a few women who were dressed in a way that didn't leave a lot for the imagination. What would you think? Would you question my walk with God? This is what the Pharisees were dealing with

in Jesus. We like to think all these sinners had already cleaned up their act before they started to hang around him, but it doesn't say that. Certainly there was a hunger there to learn from Jesus, but I'm sure their lives were still very much a work in progress.

You see, we like the Pharisees have a sophisticated rationale for not befriending people like this. We feel it might compromise our witness. Someone might get the wrong idea we condone sinful behavior. Or perhaps we're afraid if we get too close to these people we might actually become like them. You know, bad company corrupts good morals. I think if we're honest most of us can see something of ourselves in the proud muttering of the Pharisees.

I believe this is the very thing keeping us from entering into the joy of God. It's for this very reason we're not in tune with how God feels, whether it be his joy or his pain. You see, God cares deeply about people; people like the ones hanging around Jesus that day in Galilee. People can break God's heart, and people can give him joy.

### **The Joyfulness of Divine Compassion**

Jesus goes on and tells two stories to illustrate this.

**Then Jesus told them this parable: "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he 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.' 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.**

**"Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (verses 3–10).**

These two stories are quite similar; they're so similar they can be seen as two in one. In each one Jesus weaves a short story about losing, finding and rejoicing. Each is designed to be a stinging rebuke to the "stay away" attitude we often have towards the kind of people Jesus is hanging out with. At the heart of these stories is theology. What I mean by that is these stories are about God. The central figure in each story (the shepherd and the woman) are meant to teach us about God. By the way, this would have offended the Pharisees right off because they looked at both shepherds and women as inferior. But Jesus loved to tweak these guys; he loved to poke fun at them! So what do these stories teach us about God?

First, they teach us God views sinners primarily as lost. Both the sheep and the coin get lost. I believe Jesus is subtly changing our perspective here. He doesn't focus on the fact that they're sinners, but that they're lost. That changes the way I think about them. When I think of someone as a sinner, I feel contempt towards them. When I think of them as lost, I feel compassion.

Consider the two items lost in these stories. A sheep gets separated from the flock not by running away like a dog but by simply wandering off. They don't mean to; they do it without even knowing it. It usually happens while they're eating. They become so focused on their immediate need to eat grass in front of their nose that little by little they move away in the direction of more grass until finally they look up and the flock is nowhere to be seen. People do that too. We follow the zest of the moment, focusing intently on our present experience and perceived needs. We don't set out to waste our lives; we're just trying to get by. But, little by little, as we focus on our present survival and satisfaction, we wander away, and soon we're lost. Often, like a sheep, we don't even know it until it's too late.

Consider also the coin. A coin is different from a sheep. It's not a living thing; it's an inanimate object. It makes no choices about its condition. It gets lost by the carelessness or the forgetfulness of its owner. Years ago Lynn lost the diamond off her wedding ring. It just fell off. It wasn't the diamond's fault. It wasn't even Lynn's fault. Jesus is reminding us some people get lost at least partially by the circumstances of life or even the cruelty and neglect of other people. I've met many men and women who've had terrible things happen to them as children. Often times that has contributed to their lostness. Like a coin, they just kind of rolled away from God. They didn't set out to become an alcoholic or have three failed marriages. They were just trying to survive.

So if we're going to move from contempt to compassion for people far from Christ we need to change the way we look at them. We need to look at them the way God looks at them—as lost from the presence of God. I don't mean they're not sinners. In fact, Jesus calls them that in verse 7. I simply mean to change our focus to be like God's. He sees them primarily as lost and so should we.

These stories teach us another thing about God: He views lost people as a personal loss to himself. They're not just lost; they're **his** loss. In each of these stories something valuable or precious is lost by its owner. The loss of just one sheep is always significant to a shepherd, even more so the loss of a coin. This woman's coins represent the dowry she'll one day present to her husband. This was her life's savings. Students of Middle Eastern culture tell us a dowry of ten coins would have been on the small side. She was probably poor, so the loss of one coin would have been a disaster for her.

When just one person is lost, it breaks God's heart. How do you feel when something or someone is lost to you. Have you ever lost your wallet or purse, your keys, or your homework? How did you feel? We have this little dog named Daisy and one day we lost her. We panicked. We scoured the neighborhood, calling for Daisy as loud as we could. We called the police. We talked to the neighbors. Finally, we gave up, heartbroken over losing our little dog, and then she just appeared in our family room out of nowhere. The whole time she'd been sleeping under a bed in the guest room. What's the most precious thing you've ever lost? How did you feel? Could that be something of how God feels when just one person is lost? God views lost people as a personal, painful loss to himself.

It's because of that we can make another statement about God: He goes to great lengths to seek, find and restore lost people. There are four little words that appear in both stories (verses 4, 8) I want you to notice: "Until he (she) finds it..." Both the shepherd and the woman have no rest until they find what they've lost. In the case of the one lost sheep, the shepherd is willing to leave the other 99 to seek for it. That would have put them in great danger. Not only that, but in going off by himself he'd be placing himself in great danger. There were all kinds of wild animals in the Palestinian wilderness; people just didn't go wandering around at night looking for something. But this one lost sheep is so precious the shepherd is willing to risk all to find it.

On the other hand, with the woman it's not the risk that's emphasized, but the intensity and thoroughness of the search. She lights a lamp to see better at night; she frantically sweeps the house; she carefully searches every nook and cranny. Everything else is put on hold while she searches.

Have you ever considered God is on a personal, risky and intense hunt for lost people? That includes your neighbor, your schoolmate, your coworkers and that relative who so easily gets under your skin. There are people we think are so far away from him, but God is still tracking them down. He's still sweeping away the dirt to find them. He's still calling their name out in the night. Have you ever considered the events of people's lives, their problems and pains, their blessings and joys, are all part of the Master's search for them?

It's like Jesus knocks at the front door of a person's heart. In response to that they don't immediately open the door. Instead, they put locks on the door and push furniture against it. What does the Lord do? Does he give up and leave? No. He sends the Holy Spirit to slip in the back door. He goes down into the basement, where he turns up the heat and sets fires until the rising heat forces them to remove the barriers and open the front door and let the Lord in. He sets fires in our basements by putting us in limiting and painful circumstances. Maybe that's you

today. Maybe that's why you're going through what you're going through. He won't rest until you open the door.

This leads to the last thing we can say about God from these stories: God and all heaven rejoice over the repentance of just one lost person. The image of joy, laughter and celebration is at the heart of each of these stories.

Consider this: when the shepherd found his sheep it would have been lying on the ground unwilling to budge. That's what lost sheep do. The shepherd would have had to pick it up and shoulder the burden of carrying the sheep back home (no small task). But how does the shepherd react? Does he look at the sheep and say, "There you go again. You're such a pain in the neck. Can't you get your act together? Do you know what you've put me through?" No! Instead, he picks it up, wraps it around his neck and carries it home. He's not concerned about the burden; he rejoices all the way. When he gets home, he calls his friends together for a party to celebrate.

The woman does the same thing. And when Jesus applies the stories he again focuses on the joy. He says all heaven breaks out in rejoicing when one sinner repents. Jesus is saying to the Pharisees, "Why do you stand there complaining about the invitation list when all heaven is celebrating? Don't you see? You're out of tune with God. He's laughing, but you're angry and complaining." I asked earlier, What brings God joy? What makes him laugh? I'd propose to you this morning that nothing thrills God's heart more than when one lost person repents and turns to God.

People break God's heart, and people bring him joy. God views people far from him not as scum, but as lost. Not only are they lost, they're a personal and painful loss to him. So he takes great pains to seek, find and restore them. And when that happens heaven throws the party of all parties!

Stories like this call for action. They're not told just for our entertainment. They're meant to shake us out of our complacency. There are those here this morning who are lost. You're lost because you haven't repented of trying to live your life apart from God. You haven't put your trust in God's Son Jesus as your Savior. One of the things I want to do is ask for your forgiveness on behalf of many of us here who call ourselves followers of Christ. We haven't always acted towards you with the same care and compassion of the shepherd. I want you to know God sees you as immeasurably precious. Because of that he's relentlessly pursuing you. All the bumps and bruises of your life, even the blessings and joys, are the persistent footsteps of a gracious God. It's the Lord turning up the heat. There's only one thing left for you to do and that's to let him in. Admit to him that you're lost and you want him in your life. Accept his gift to you—forgiveness and eternal life. You can't earn that. Someone else earned it for you. Someone else paid for it, and that's his son, Jesus.

There are also those here who are more like the proud Pharisees than anyone else in this story. Some of us are still standing on the fringe shaking our heads and wondering why Jesus has to dirty himself with lost people. Most of us know better than to say that, but deep down we see ourselves in a different category than those others. We might accept God welcomes them into his family, but we don't want to sit at the same table with them. In this story, Jesus speaks of "the ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent." Is that you? I've got news for you. This is a classic use of irony or even sarcasm on the part of Jesus. There's no such thing as righteous people who don't need to repent. In fact, if you're so proud that you think that, you need to repent every bit as much as the tax collectors and sinners in this story. You need to repent of your pride. If you don't repent of your proud self-righteousness, you won't be able to share in the Father's joy. Will you humble yourself, repent of your pride and accept the invitation to rejoice over what God rejoices over?

Most of us here today probably understand what the great song says, "I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see." How does this story challenge us? Here's the challenge: Will you shoulder the Father's burden? The Father's burden is for lost people to be found; to come to know the love of Christ. Will you make that burden your own? The problem is most of us prefer staying with the flock. But if we're going to share God's burden we'll have to leave the flock. We'll have to leave our comfort zones and holy huddles and go out into the dark and dangerous wilderness where we don't feel very safe. The problem for many of us isn't that we're too close to unbelievers, but that we're simply out of touch with them because we're rarely with them. We don't like to hang out where they hang out. And when we are with them we really don't listen to them. We don't take time to hear their story and feel their pain. Not only do we need to leave the flock, we need to be willing to bear the burden of their restoration. That's what the shepherd did in the story. He carried the lost sheep home. We need to assume responsibility for these people. We need to care for them and serve them. We need to be tender and patient with them. They can't walk yet, so we should gladly bear with their weakness. And the result of all

that is joy. There are many believers here today who've lost their joy, and I wonder if that's because we've lost sight of what brings God and angels joy.

In his book, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, Chris Seay mentions a profound lesson he learned from his father about loving people he considered "bad."

"Growing up, we didn't have much money, so we used to get outfield deck seats (aka the cheap seats) to see the baseball games at the Houston Astrodome. Most of the people buying the cheap seats did so to save more money for beer. After the first few innings, they were drunk, and by the time the seventh-inning stretch rolled around, there would be beer mixed with peanut shells on the floor, spilled beer down your back, and a brawl two rows over and back to the left. It was ugly out there. As a kid, I learned from a lot of people that we were sitting with the 'bad people.'

"There was one consistently drunk fan named Batty Bob. He was a self-proclaimed Houston Astros mascot. He'd come to all the games wearing a rainbow wig, and he'd lead slurred cheers in the stands. I remember once my dad went out to sit and talk with Batty Bob. He spent the whole game with Bob, then walked him out to the parking lot to bring him home with us. I was more than confused, because he was one of the 'bad people.'

"When we got home, my dad came to me and explained how God loved Batty Bob. I remember thinking, Really? Batty Bob? And he stayed with us for a few days to get back on his feet. This is when I started to realize that God did not despise these people; he dearly loved them."

If we're going to know the Father's joy we have to know what breaks his heart and be willing to share his burden. Lost people break his heart. ***"In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of angels of God over one sinner who repents."***

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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