



What brings God joy? What thrills his heart and causes him to celebrate? What makes God smile? I think the answer is found in two short stories that Jesus told.

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.”

Then Jesus told them this parable: (Luke 15:1–3).

Verses 1–3 set the context for the three following parables. Why was eating with tax collectors and sinners unacceptable? In Ancient Palestine meals were very significant and who you ate with was especially important. Meals defined cultural boundaries. Jews didn't eat with Gentiles. The rich didn't eat with the poor. Tax collectors and sinners were the notorious people of their day. They were dishonest and immoral. They were considered outcasts, people the righteous Jews and scribes looked down upon. They believed it was a religious duty to stay away from them. Psalm 1:1 says that the righteous don't associate with sinners.

The Pharisees and scribes didn't like what they saw Jesus doing. What was their problem? They had no compassion for people far from God. Even though God's plan since the creation of the world was for all people to know him, they felt that as the chosen people of God, God was solely interested in them. The religious people, God's people, were failing in their role as shepherds of Israel. God wanted his people to be a beacon of light drawing all people to him as a result of their witness. Instead, they were rejecting those outside the Jewish faith.

Isn't this the natural tendency for Christians and churches? I call this “ingrown eyeballs.” The hospital for the sick, the church, can easily become a country club for the righteous.

What attracted outcasts to Jesus? He cared about them. He welcomed them. He was their friend. He neither condoned their sinful behavior nor had strings attached to his relationship with them. He loved them for who they are—people created in the image of God—not for what they might become.

A while ago I went to the Dominican Republic. Culturally, Christianity is very conservative there. If you are a Christian you don't drink, smoke, date or talk to people that do! Last time I was there, I met a very wealthy cigar maker. He invited us to his private cigar lounge. We went and enjoyed our time with him and his powerful friends. His stumbling block was how he thought

Christians were supposed to behave. He couldn't believe a pastor was hanging out with him. In his thinking a Christian was about what they stayed away from, not God's work on the inside. By God's grace, I was able to share the Gospel with him.

I wonder how many people feel the same way? They think they need to get their act cleaned up before they come to God, before they come to church. Jesus said come as you are, not as you hope to be. As he begins his work in you, he'll deal with those other things in time.

We always need to exercise discernment in who we minister to and where we minister. I get that. But, I have no problem with gaining a reputation for being a pastor who hangs out with outcasts and with questionable people.

The Lost Sheep

“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” (verses 4–7).

Who were shepherds and what did people think about them? Most people today completely misunderstand the job and reputation of shepherds. Shepherding was a job looked down upon by the religious elites. Shepherds were wild and rough people. They were the “rednecks” of Ancient Palestine. They spent tons of time alone, in the wild, with sheep as companions. They were also considered religiously unclean because of their work with filthy animals. They too were outcasts and associated with tax collectors and sinners. As soon as Jesus began sharing this parable you can almost feel the disgust and tension from the Pharisees. Nonetheless, shepherding was an image used for God and his care people.

Why would a shepherd leave the 99 to find 1? Isn't that irresponsible and risky? Wolves need to eat too! One hundred sheep was an above-average sized flock and straying sheep was a common problem. A count was taken every night. A good shepherd knew all his sheep and called them each by name. This was not just any sheep, it was one loved, cared for and protected by the shepherd.

With this size of the flock, there was probably another shepherd or a neighboring shepherd to care for the 99. Care for one sheep does not rule out care for the 99 sheep. Jesus could be saying that finding the one lost sheep is worth the risk of leaving the 99 alone in the open field!

Let's talk about sheep. How do sheep get lost? They are really dumb. They don't intentionally run away. They eat grass with their heads down and if they are not careful they just wander off. A lost sheep would usually lie down and give up, not willing to find its way back. It didn't know how to. The scared and often injured sheep would have to be carried back by the shepherd once found. This took great effort to both find the sheep and bring it back.

Who are the 99 sheep? First, this is a story, a parable, an allegory. God is not a shepherd or a woman who lost a coin. He is like a shepherd. We are not sheep. We act like sheep. Scholars are divided on who the 99 sheep represent. But, again, that's not the point of the story. Some believe the 99 are followers of Jesus, those who have been made righteous, are positionally already right with God, not without sin, but righteous. They don't need to repent because they have already repented and come to faith in Jesus. Early church fathers got around this difficult interpretation problem by saying the 99 were angels.

Most likely I think the 99 are the religious authorities, the Pharisees and scribes. They rejected Jesus and his offer of forgiveness believing they were righteous people not needing to repent. Luke talked about them earlier in 5:31-32, ***"It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."*** The Pharisees were self-righteous. They needed to humble themselves, acknowledge their sin, ask for forgiveness and repent. They were unwilling and according to the third parable they are just as lost as the prodigal son. The follower of Jesus knows that repentance is not a one time act. It's a habit of the heart. We sin, we confess and we repent (turn away from it). I do this weekly. There is irony in this story. Jesus calls the self-righteous religious leaders righteous. You call yourselves righteous but you are not.

God views people who do not know him as lost. They have strayed from home and from the Great Shepherd. They are wandering in the dark. The reality is that we are all sinners. The difference is that Christians are forgiven sinners. We once were lost but now we are found. When I view people who are not in relationship with God as lost and not just sinners, I have much more compassion for them. To be lost is to be confused, alone, scared and not sure of how to get home.

At 17 I was a lost sheep. I was raised in a family that didn't know Jesus. My mom wrestled with drug addiction. Like the sheep and the coin, I didn't choose any of that. It wasn't my fault either. I

was lost and didn't know God's purpose for my life. I said and did things I was not proud of. I was lost. Thankfully some guys on my varsity football team invited me to church and the rest is history.

I've learned there are various degrees of "lostness" with people. In a book entitled, *I Once Was Lost*, authors Don Everts and Doug Schaupp identify "Five Thresholds" people who don't know Jesus, need to cross in order to go from lost to found. After years of working with college students they identified these five thresholds, I think are very helpful.

Trusting a Christian

Many people in the Bay Area don't even know another Christian, let alone trust one. Christians are often viewed as judgmental, unloving, argumentative and hypocritical. Jesus reminds us to love people simply to love them with no strings attached. I trusted a few of the Christian guys on my team.

Becoming curious

There are lost people who are curious about the things of God. This is why Jesus spoke in parables, they piqued people's curiosity and made them think. I was curious about God at 17, curious about why these guys went to church and youth group. I have several friends at this threshold. They are curious about what I do and why I do it. They ask questions every now and then about my faith. I try not to be pushy.

Opening up to change

This is the most difficult threshold for lost people to overcome because they don't think they need God or need to change. People can be stuck in their ways and their thinking and opening up to change is difficult. Some are like the Rich Young Ruler (Mark 10) who wanted to be with Jesus but just couldn't let go of his materialistic heart. If you have family or friends at this threshold then this is where we really should be praying hard for them, asking God to open up their hearts to change. The night I gave my life to Jesus there were a dozen elderly women from the church praying for me.

Seeking after God

These are people that are still lost, but they are actively seeking God. They have not made a decision to surrender all and follow Jesus, but they are really close. These lost seekers seek Jesus and not just God. They are beginning to count the cost of following Jesus. They start to spend time with other Christians. They come to church and maybe even join a small group. Some of you here are seekers. You're on a journey of faith. We want CPC to be a place where seekers can seek. But, my job as a pastor is to challenge you to take the next step. Studies show that the longer you attend church without making a decision to follow Jesus the less likely you'll end up making that decision.

Entering the Kingdom

At this threshold the Gospel is crystal clear. You understand with your head and your heart why Jesus came, died, and was raised to new life. A decision is made to follow Jesus. Repentance happens. You start the process of discipleship. You're baptized and the church celebrates with joy!

A hallmark of this parable is joy. Before we look at the next parable, I want to touch on the joy expressed by God. These are called Parables of Joy. Once the lost sheep is found, the shepherd joyfully carries it home. He throws a party with his friends and neighbors. Heaven rejoices and has a party as well! Heaven is not a boring place. It's a place of constant joy and celebration every time a sinner repents and comes to faith in Jesus. But, there is no joy in heaven over 99 self-righteous people who don't think they to repent.

The Lost Coin

"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 8–10).

If you've ever lost something of value, you can go crazy trying to find it! The main difference between this parable and the lost sheep is the focus on the woman's persistence. This woman was very diligent. She lit a lamp and swept the entire home. She would not stop until she found the lost coin.

Why was she so diligent? She was probably poor; the house was small, had no windows and a dirt floor. The money was probably all she had. It could have been her entire life savings. There were no banks or safe deposit boxes. A coin was worth about one day's wages; it was a good amount of money. And again, we see God's joy in this story. She too rejoices with her friends and neighbors after finding the lost coin. Does our worship reflect the joy of being lost then found?

What do these parables have in common? Both the sheep and the coin were lost. Both were valuable. Both had someone, their owner, eagerly looking for them. Both took hard work to find. When found, the owner had great joy and celebrated with others. And both are connected to God's joyful reaction in heaven.

What does this tell us about God/Jesus? This parable is a mirror for the character and nature of God. I believe how we view God is critically important to how we think and behave. What does this parable tell us about Jesus?

Jesus takes the initiative in pursuing lost people. He relentlessly pursues lost people because we are his valuable possessions. We

are his masterpieces. He created us in his image. We are his sons and daughters and he wants us back in relationship with him. I hear people sometimes say, "I found my way back to God." No you didn't, God found you! He always takes the initiative first. What does this parable tell us about Jesus?

Jesus diligently searches for lost people. He is relentless, not casual, about his search. He's the "hound dog of heaven." What does this parable tell us about Jesus?

Jesus' seeking and receiving sinners greatly pleases God. The lost becoming found brings great joy to the heart of God. Jesus' one mission in his three years on earth was very simple—to seek and save the lost. **"For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost"** (Luke 19:10).

Jesus joyfully pursues sinners and so should we. God is on a great rescue mission to bring his children home. That's really the big idea of the Bible. **"God so loved the world that he gave his only Son."** God's pursuit of his children cost him his very own child. We can be found because Jesus was crucified for our lostness.

What does this parable tell us to do? Nothing specific really. Instead it probes the condition of our hearts. It seeks to read-just our attitude and perspective on lost people. The message is clear—followers of Jesus should relentlessly pursue lost people because he is doing the same.

What does this mean for the church? The temptation for a church and for individual Christians is to completely ignore the lost. Church growth experts say that once your church is over 300 people you forget about the lost because the needs of the found are so great. Does our budget and ministries of the church reflect God's desire to rescue sinners? How passionate are we as a church about seeking lost people? How would we really respond if modern day "tax collectors and sinners" flooded into our church? How can we do a better job celebrating life change here at CPC?

What does this mean for you? How are you doing at sharing your faith with people? When was the last time you invited someone to church? Does your heart break for the lostness of people around you or does it anger you with self righteousness? Are most of your friends Christians? I know it's not easy to engage people like Jesus did. We're busy, we don't want to be tempted by what they do, and we fear peoples' reactions.

What about kids and teenagers? Most of you go to school or have friends who do not know Jesus personally like you. Pray for your friends. Don't be afraid to talk about your faith with them. Invite them to church and to activities CPC Kids and Student Ministries do. You're a missionary!

**The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,**

he leads me beside quiet waters,
he refreshes my soul.
He guides me along the right paths
for his name's sake.
Even though I walk
through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely your goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord
forever. -- Psalm 23

*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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