

**LUKE 15:1–10.** (EHV)

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming to Jesus to hear him. But the Pharisees and the experts in the law were complaining, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” He told them this parable: “Which one of you, if you had one hundred sheep and lost one of them, would not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that was lost until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls together his friends and his neighbors, telling them, ‘Rejoice with me, because I have found my lost sheep!’ I tell you, in the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who do not need to repent. Or what woman who has ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, would not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? And when she finds it, she calls together her friends and neighbors and says, ‘Rejoice with me, because I have found the lost coin.’ In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Have you ever lost your wallet? Perhaps at a park or a reception hall or some other venue? Has it ever affected the rest of your family or someone else who was traveling with you?

It’s a frantic search when you go back to find it, isn’t it? Not only do you simply want to find it, but you don’t want to inconvenience everyone else who thought they were going to be back home already. You look everywhere, high and low, up and down. You start to lose your mind, and the others are getting frustrated too, not only because you’re keeping them from home, but also because they feel for you and your frustration is rubbing off on them.

Right when you think you’re going to lose your mind and you’ve begged God for the umpteenth time not to let you lose your wallet, there it is. “I found it!” you shout.

All the others stop searching, look up at you with placid faces, calmly return to the vehicle, and you return home in silence...

That’s not right at all, is it? No, usually they all share your relief and joy. Exclamations like “Thank goodness!” and “Nice job!” and “Hallelujah!” go from mouth to mouth.

But imagine if that were the reaction. Imagine if it were worse—if they not only didn’t show any emotion, but actually expressed anger at you finding your wallet, and grumbled about the joy you felt the whole way home. How strange that would be?

That’s how Jesus felt on this occasion. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law were muttering, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” And Jesus thought, “Is this the right attitude to have toward the lost? Is the fact that I welcome sinners supposed to be an accusation?”

Luke tells us that all the tax collectors and sinners were coming to Jesus to listen to him. When he says “all,” he doesn’t mean every last one was there, but it’s kind of like when you say “the whole town” showed up for a rodeo or other event. There were *a lot* of tax collectors and sinners gathering around Jesus, and it seems that they were there at his own invitation, eating a meal with him as he talked to them.

Tax collectors were generally looked down on as thieves. You see, the Roman government didn't have an April 15, when you filed your income taxes. No, they had a certain amount of taxes that they wanted to collect every year, and they simply farmed those taxes out to tax collectors and said, "Get us our money, and you can keep what's left." Those chief tax collectors in turn farmed their particular tax responsibility out to others under them, after raising the figure considerably to make a tidy profit for themselves, and told their underlings the same thing, "Get me my money, and you can keep what's left." You can see how such a system had a lot of room for abuse, and many tax collectors did abuse it. Thus their reputation.

And then the other "sinners." We don't need to think too hard to imagine what kind of reputation these people had. Some probably had a history of violence. Some had robbed or stolen in even worse ways than the tax collectors. But back then, just like today, when people thought of sinners, especially violations against the Sixth Commandment came to mind. The people Jesus was welcoming had a history of fornication, adultery, prostitution; doubtless a few of them were also known for homosexual activity.

But all of these people came to listen to Jesus, and he was welcoming all of them, and even eating with them. The Pharisees and the teachers of the law didn't like it, and they made their displeasure known. And in response to their muttering and grumbling, Jesus told them "this parable." Note that it's singular. Even though there are two stories, they are one parable; they are two different ways of driving home the same point.

Here's the first part of the parable: "Which one of you, if you had one hundred sheep and lost one of them, would not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that was lost until he finds it?" A couple months ago we talked about the bad reputation of shepherds in Women's Bible Study. In some cases, shepherds were not even considered qualified to give testimony in court. So by saying, "if you had one hundred sheep and lost one of them," Jesus is not only calling to mind Psalm 23 and other Good Shepherd sections in the Old Testament; he is also asking the Pharisees and the teachers of the law to imagine themselves belonging to the very category of sinners that they are muttering about.

"Which one of you, if you had one hundred sheep and lost one of them, would not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that was lost until he finds it?" Jesus is probably imagining a time in late afternoon or early evening when a shepherd holds up his staff against the view of his flock and counts them one by one and finds that one is missing. Immediately all of his thought and focus goes to the one lost sheep. It's kind of like when one of a number of children gets sick, and the parents' attention hones in on the sick child—not because they don't care about the others, but because the sick one needs their attention the most.

The shepherd clambers over the nearby mountains and hills, searches the thickets and groves, calling out for his lost sheep with his distinctive call and waiting to hear its bleating reply. Finally he hears a faint response to his call in the distance. He walks a ways in its direction and repeats his call, and hears the response again, stronger this time. Finally he locates his sheep curled up against a mossy rock. "And when he finds it," Jesus says, "he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls together his friends and his neighbors, telling them, 'Rejoice with me, because I have found my lost sheep!'" The relief and joy that you experience over a lost wallet, set of keys, or phone that you found is multiplied that much more in the case of the shepherd and this living creature.

I remember one time when I was a child and we lived in the country, we lost our Golden Retriever. My dad and mom drove around a little bit, calling for him, but there was only so far he was likely to have gone. Eventually they gave up and returned home and resorted to going outside every so often and calling him in their distinctive way. We kids were worried sick and kept asking about him. He wasn't just some lost thing. He was our pet. After it turned dark, my dad went out again to call for him in the stillness of the night, and he finally heard the faint sound of his collar jingling. Dad kept calling all the more energetically and the sound grew louder until there he was! Now if the dog had wandered off for just five minutes, Dad probably would have given him the business and disciplined him in some way. In fact, even then as a kid, I was kind of wondering if my dad was still going to discipline the dog in some way. But no, Dad only embraced him and pet him and told him he was a good boy for coming back and shared his joy with all of us now that our lost pet had been found.

That was the joy of the shepherd. He had to share it with somebody. So he called his friends and neighbors together for a little celebration.

What's the point? Jesus says, "I tell you, in the same way there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who do not need to repent." I used to really wrack my brain trying to figure out who these ninety-nine were. After all, who doesn't need to repent? I used to think that Jesus was being ironic and was talking about those who didn't *think* they needed to repent. But the concept of repentance can be used two different ways in Scripture. It can be used in one sense to refer to what Christians do every day, to refer to their Christian breath, if you will—the repeated pattern and cycle of recognizing sin and feeling sorrow over sin and going to Jesus for forgiveness and trusting in his forgiveness. But it can also be used in another sense to refer to conversion, when someone outside the Church, outside of Christ's pen, puts his or her trust in Christ and thereby returns to Christ's fold—whether for the first time or some subsequent time. I think that's what Jesus is referring to with the ninety-nine here who do not need to repent. They are already in the fold. They still have sins they need to struggle against, a tendency to wander that they have to fight against with his help, but they are in the fold and are safe. The angels are happy with those ninety-nine, just like we were happy when our dog was with us. But they're exultant when a sinner who is lost and is prey for the devil repents and is found by Jesus and brought home.

Now Jesus tells the second part of the parable: "Or what woman who has ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, would not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?" Note that these are not ordinary silver coins. Each of these silver coins represents an entire day's wages, so this would be going to the bank to deposit your paycheck, but keeping \$120 to put in your wallet, and then misplacing your wallet in your house. Is it the end of the world if you lose that wallet with that money? No, but it would make you feel pretty bad, and you'll search high and low to find it. That's what this woman does.

"And when she finds it, she calls together her friends and neighbors and says, 'Rejoice with me, because I have found the lost coin.'" Once she finds her lost coin, with that \$120 she can afford to throw a small party with her friends and neighbors to celebrate finding what was lost.

What's the point? Basically the same thing: "In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

So when Jesus welcomes tax collectors and sinners who have returned to the fold, is that really something of which to accuse him? Or is that something for which to acclaim him? Isn't that an occasion for celebration and rejoicing right along with Jesus and with those who were formerly lost?

Notice that there is a small difference between the two parts of Jesus' parable. The first part about the lost sheep was more of a representation of those with whom Jesus was eating. They had been lost out in the wild, so to speak. They weren't even near the fold. The tax collectors truly thought the key to happiness was getting as much money as you could get away with; they didn't even suspect that there could be another road to happiness, a deeper happiness. The other sinners truly thought the key to happiness was to take out your frustrations on others or to drown out everything else by feeding your senses with life's various pleasures as much as possible. They didn't even suspect there could be another way, or if they did, they had no idea what it could be.

But in the second part, the coin that was lost was *lost right at home*. The lost sheep who was found represents the repentant tax collectors and sinners, but the lost coin that was found potentially represents the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, who had grown up with God's word and spent their lives around God's word but who had somehow lost sight of its message. It represents them if they also repent and join Jesus in rejoicing with the lost who have been found and in eating with them. In telling this parable, Jesus is in fact doing what the woman in his parable was doing—trying to bring the lost Pharisees and tax collectors into the light. He is trying to take the already great joy of heaven and make it even greater.

What exactly had happened to the Pharisees and teachers of the law?

In Durham, North Carolina, there is a somewhat famous overpass. The overpass is a railroad bridge that was built 11 feet, 8 inches above the road underneath about a hundred years ago before any standards for minimum clearance. For various reasons the railroad company isn't really interested in raising the bridge, and for various reasons the road can't really be lowered without terrible expense either. So for the railroad company's part, they have installed a large steel crash beam right in front of the overpass, to protect their bride and the trains that use it.

As for the city of Durham, they have also taken multiple precautions. They have installed "low clearance" signs on each of the three blocks leading up to the overpass. Several blocks ahead of the overpass, the speed limit goes down 25 miles per hour, so that drivers can easily read the warning signs. The city has also installed a sensor on the road half a block before the overpass that detects if an approaching truck is overheight. If it is, the sensor triggers an LED blackout warning sign that tells them they are overheight and should turn onto a side road. The sensor also triggers a red-light phase at the last intersection before the overpass, so that the driver has fifty seconds to read the warning signs and consider his next move.

In spite of all this, the overpass has become known as the Can Opener, and 11 Foot 8 Videos are some of the most popular on YouTube, because still to this day, about once a month a truck gets damaged at the bridge. Countless Penske rental trucks have had their tops peeled off there. Countless RVs have driven straight through and left behind their AC units and vents that were taken clean off. And people don't just watch those videos; they of course like to comment

too. Most of them take obvious pleasure in the damage that these drivers do to their trucks. After all the warnings in place, oftentimes the response is, “How could the driver be so stupid?”

But as one documentary on the bridge aptly put it, the reason people are so fascinated with the accidents at that bridge is because they like to assume that of course they would not make the same mistake in the same situation, and so the accidents make them feel better about themselves. But how many times have you been distracted while you were driving? Do you always know what was on the last warning sign you passed? As the ancient poet says, “Our neighbor’s bunch upon his back is known, but we forget what rises from our own.”

That’s what happened with the Pharisees. And the same thing happens in the Christian Church today. “What is happening to our society?”, we ask. “What is wrong with the world?”, we ask. “How can people do such things?”, we ask. Those questions have a place, but too often we forget that before our baptism, before our conversion, we were in their shoes. We forget that even today the same sinful heart still beats inside of us and it is only due to the grace of God if it doesn’t accomplish its purposes like it once did. So no wonder when one of them manages to make it into the Church and we are suspicious and stay away, like the early Christians did with Paul when he was first converted. And the more we look down our noses at such people, even when they repent, the more we ourselves are getting lost right at home.

But listen to Jesus. He is not just calling out to the lost out there, whatever they might have done, whatever their reputation might be, he is also calling to us here at home, so to speak: The angels of God are waiting to rejoice. Repent of your self-righteousness yourself. Jesus wants to welcome you and eat with you. Look for opportunities to share the gospel with others, so that Jesus can welcome them and the angels can rejoice over them too. And if any of them should listen and repent, by all means share in Jesus’s joy by welcoming them and eating with them, just as Jesus does, just as Jesus has done with you.

“Jesus welcomes sinners.” That’s not just good news for those “out there.” That’s good news for us. “Jesus welcomes sinners” is not an accusation; it is an acclamation that should proceed from our hearts and lips every day. Jesus welcomes sinners and eats with them. That means Jesus welcomes and eats with you and with me. Amen.