

Now the tax collectors and “sinners” were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.” Then Jesus told them this parable: “Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not 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. Does she not 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.”

Dear friends in Christ,

I'd like you to think of a time you've hurt someone, offended someone, cost someone something. We've all done it. We've said something to a friend that we desperately wish we could take back, but once you say it, you know you can't. We broke something that belonged to someone else, maybe even something that could never be replaced. We did something and didn't even realize that what we did hurt another person. When we do any of these kinds of things and we realize the pain we've caused, we're heartbroken. We'd love to fix it, but we can't, so our only hope is that we will be forgiven. If we could be confident that we are totally forgiven and that all is good again, only then could we be truly happy.

The words of Luke's gospel, chapter 15, remind us of the need for sinful people to be forgiven by God and the kind of happiness and rejoicing that actually does occur when there is forgiveness from the Lord. **FORGIVENESS AND REJOICING**, that's what we hear about from God's Word today.

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Depending upon which side a person was on, which crowd they were in that day, they were either really happy or really upset. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem for the last time; he was going to his death. Of course, he was the only one who really knew and understood that. But as he went along from place to place, he continually drew crowds. This day there was a crowd of “sinners,” so to speak, and a crowd of religious leaders, made up of both Pharisees and Teachers of the Law.

Those religious men looked on as these notorious sinners sat at Jesus' feet listening intently to what he was saying...and they weren't very happy about it! Not only did the tax collectors gather around him, a few years back Jesus had made one of “them” into a disciple of his! You may remember how Matthew was a tax collector who was called to discipleship by Jesus right from his tax collecting booth! He was so happy that he immediately held a party for Jesus. And who did he invite? Other tax collectors! That was early in Jesus' earthly ministry. Here at the end of his earthly ministry, Jesus is still hanging around with society's undesirables! These people had few friends and hardly anyone would even be seen speaking with them. This flocking to Jesus was not a one-time thing either—they kept coming to Jesus. You get the sense that there was a constant stream of people or waves of people meeting around Jesus to hear him. And Jesus received them, just as we sing in the hymn.

Why was he doing that? Because these sinful people—in many cases publicly known sinners—needed to repent. And if they would listen to Jesus, repent of their sins, and trust in him for forgiveness, they would be saved and there would be rejoicing in heaven!

These people had a chance because they had actually huddled around Jesus so that they could listen to him. How different were the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law?! They were there, but they weren't there to listen. They were there to find fault with Jesus...and to mutter. And mutter they did: **“This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”** Clearly Jesus was not a trustworthy spiritual leader if he would do that! From the way we read it in English, you might get the idea that this was their one declaration about Jesus and what he was doing. Not so. The way it is recorded in Greek tells us that they kept on muttering and grumbling. They had lots to complain about and they did it among the people there. Did they have Scripture to back up their feelings and mutterings? No. But they did have their own writings that said his mingling with sinners was not appropriate. Jesus wasn't a Pharisee, but they still placed him under their man-made rules.

Well, Jesus had a story for them—a parable, an earthly story with a spiritual meaning. The story is about the 1 in 100. It's interesting that Jesus made the Pharisees consider themselves as the subject of the story. **“Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them.”** His story said to them: *“If it was you, you would leave the 99 totally alone to find that one lost sheep.”* No one could argue; this is absolutely what they would have done. And the person who does that—leaves the rest to find the one—would be overjoyed in finding the lost one, so much so that he would call together friends to share his joy. That's what people do, isn't it? We have good news. We like to share it with others. And we find even more joy when others are happy along with us.

Let's be sure that we understand what causes the joy in Jesus' story. It is the FINDING of the sheep that causes the joy. The sheep is a sheep. It's a sheep like the other 99 sheep. It is important, obviously—the concern, the searching, the rejoicing all tell you that the sheep is important. But it is not more important than the rest. What brings joy is that a sheep that was lost has been found. The FINDING of the sheep brings joy not just to the shepherd who locates the wandering animal, but it brings joy to those around him too.

Jesus made it easy on the Pharisees and us by explaining what this story means: **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.**

The rejoicing of the shepherd and his friends is like the rejoicing of Jesus, the Good Shepherd, and those around him in heaven when a sinner repents. It is like he or she was lost and then found. Being lost is being lost in sin and being lost eternally in hell. God doesn't want that for anyone! How wonderful it is to hear that God rejoices when a person repents and believes!

The Pharisees needed a second story...and so do we. This story is about a woman, a woman who has ten drachmas, ten coins. One way of valuing those coins today would make it about \$500-\$600 (ten days' worth of labor wage [minimum wage]). The woman loses a coin—about \$50 bucks. You would agree that this would be worth searching for! The woman lights a lamp, sweeps the house and doesn't stop until she finally comes up with the coin. She too tells her friends about how she lost a significant part of her money to live on, but has found it. And her joy is magnified as others around her join in her good news. Jesus explains again, **“In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”**

God has billions of people in this world, not just 100 sheep and not just 10 coins. And in a way we cannot even begin to fathom, he loves all the people of the world and wants them all to be saved. He wants every person to repent of their sins before him, turn to him in faith, and live eternally with him in heaven. God desperately wants this. That's how big his love is—again, beyond our comprehension, but Scripture tells us that is true. That is why he sent his Son to die for sin. That is why Jesus took the time with sinners. That's why he made the effort to teach those who were at that moment rejecting him, telling them two stories to help them understand and overcome their unbelief.

Jesus would have rejoiced in the Pharisees and the Scribes had they listened to him and repented because they were sinners too. Jesus ate with them too, but they didn't listen to what he had to say. Instead they rejected him, did not repent and were lost.

Here we find a warning not to be like the Pharisees who did not understand that God's forgiveness is extended to every kind of person there is and that when anyone repents for their sin and trusts in Christ, God rejoices. Anyone who is a Christian, who has the same way of thinking Jesus does, also rejoices. We're not to think that we are deserving of God's love but others aren't. We're not to think that some people are out of the reach of Jesus and his love. We're not to think that we are somehow less sinful than others—a sinner is a sinner! We all need the forgiveness of God in Jesus and his blood. And God and the angels in heaven will rejoice whenever there is repentance and faith.

There is also an encouragement here and it might not be what you have previously thought it to be. Some may have only applied these stories of Jesus in this way: that when someone isn't coming to church, Jesus says leave the flock and find the one and bring him or her back. Sometimes this is the application people use to define what they want their pastor doing. But do you see what Jesus is really driving at here? It's much bigger than that, isn't it?

Jesus' actions—talking and eating with sinners, sharing with them the need for repentance over their sin and the promise of forgiveness and life through him—along with his words (these two stories) speak to us about God's forgiveness and his rejoicing.

You and I have been the recipients of his forgiveness! You and I have been rejoiced over by God and angels! How amazing is that?! And the thing is, you and I did not cause that to happen because we're such good people. The truth is that God, in his grace, gave us faith to trust Jesus, gave us the desire to listen to him speak to us, and brought us to repentance. It is God who did these amazing things in us. Pharisaical hearts are gone when we realize this. It wasn't us, it was God. And now we think like God. We want everyone to hear and to experience the forgiveness and love of God in Jesus.

So we also find encouragement to action in these parables. He records them for us so that we can apply them to ourselves and so that we can reach out to the wandering sheep and the lost coins in our lives. We are to be God's hand to do his work here, to bring Jesus to them so that they will no longer be lost, but found. The real **SEARCHING** is done by the Word of God—that is what leads the sinner to the kind of repentance Jesus talked about with the tax collectors and sinners. The **FINDING** is when a sinner repents of their sin and trusts in Jesus as their Savior. And the **REJOICING** is what God does in heaven...and all the angels with him! If you are so blessed, so fortunate to be the instrument of God, the person who sees this happen in a person, then you too will rejoice!

Your prayers to God today should include thanks that he found you when you were lost, that he always keep you mindful of his grace so that you do not ever behave like those Pharisees and teachers of the law, and that God use you to search and share forgiveness with the lost so that there will be much rejoicing! That will be my prayer today as well. May God in his goodness grant those things. Amen.

**Now the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.**