

I want to start today with a confession: When I first started in ministry, I had my troubling lack of compassion for people who were not Christians.

- My passion was coaching, encouraging, and teaching believers. I left people far from God to those with evangelism gifting. I just didn't relate with spiritually lost people.
- At times my cold reasoning went something like this; "If they're not interested in my God then "to bad" for them. I'm not gonna beg them. When they finally decide to come to their senses, when they finally see the light...I'll be ready to teach and encourage them. But, until then... not my concern."
- Instead of compassion, I took an almost defensive posture. Sort of like, "I can't believe you don't see your obvious need for Jesus." Instead of love, instead of compassion, I felt a kind of defensiveness... like how far do you expect me to go to try and reach people who don't seem to give a rip about God?

Over time I spent some time marinating in some truth in the Bible that really began to rattle my perspective. I was kind of annoyed by the depth of compassion and love God has for those who don't even acknowledge him. And I began to think, if God has such a heart for those who are rejecting him, then who am I to have a chip on my shoulder about them? The more I studied, the more clearly, I recognized how my heart and God's heart were seriously out of alignment in this issue.

The questions I want to explore with you this morning is this:

1. *Are you clear about how God feels about lost people?*
2. *And just as important is the question: Is your heart aligned with God's on this issue?*

[Transition] - In Luke 15 Jesus tells three very similar parables back-to-back in sequence. Let's review them and see how they address these questions. Turn in your Bibles to Luke 15.

Before we read...let's get the context:

Jesus was teaching and some of Jerusalem's finest were pulling in close to listen to him—there were fantastic sinners and hated tax collectors all huddling around Jesus.

And the Pharisees rip Jesus for hanging out with them and bring friendly with them. The text says the Pharisees "muttered." The word means, "To express discontent in an emphatic way—'to complain, to grumble, to groan, to sigh,' 25.143) to complain in an intensive and excessive manner —'to complain strongly.'¹ So you can just hear these guys making a scene.

When Jesus hears this annoying groaning and complaining, he tells three stories. Read through the three stories in Luke 15 (4 minutes)

[Transition] - Now, with all three of these stories in front of us, let's take a look at the common elements in each of them because it feels like Jesus is using repetition to make a very important point in the face of the Pharisees criticisms for hanging around those who are rough around the edges.

Three common elements to each of these three stories

1. They each lost something that was indescribably valuable to them.

The shepherd lost a prized sheep, the woman a valuable coin, and the father felt the deep pain of a lost, and wayward son.

¹ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 432.

[Illustration] - You ever lose something super valuable to you? What happens to you? Ya...you begin to search obsessively, right? You stop everything...you can't think about anything else until you find what you're looking for. When we lose something that's not big deal, we think, "Oh well." But, when it really matters to you, oh man...we search feverishly, we yell at the whole family... "anyone seen my...." Help me look for it!! We retrace our steps. We try to think...think...think...where could it be? We obsess and focus all our efforts...cuz what is lost...MATTERS!!

[Transition] - That's what each of these did.

2. They each prioritized the lost valuable and searched diligently.

Notice...the shepherd valued the one lost sheep so much he was willing to leave the other 99 in order to search for his lost sheep. Notice in verse 4, he searched "until he found it." He didn't give up. That's the way it is when you're searching for something that really matters to you...you don't stop.....you can't stop until you find it.

And the father, went about his days, but he obviously had an eye out for his son's return because he sees him coming from a long distance away. You know his son's return was always on his mind.

The woman stops everything she's doing, turns all the lights on, and goes back over her tracks cleaning, cleaning, cleaning. Again...text says, she diligently searches, "until she finds the coin."

[Illustration] - Story of my mother losing her diamond in the fifth wheel.

You guys know what it's like when you lose something that really, really, mattered to you? You can't do anything else; you can't think about anything else; you can't focus on anything else.

If it's at night, you go to bed but you just lay there, spinning, spinning, spinning, staring at the ceiling trying to figure out where that freaking

thing is. That obsession to find what is lost is the obsession of each of those in these parables who have lost something super valuable to them.

[Transition] - Then...finally...when they find their lost treasure...they rejoice, they celebrate.

3. When they find the lost valuable, they rejoice.

In each scenario, there was a huge celebration when the lost treasure was finally found.

[Illustration] - One of your kids ever get away from you at a store, or an amusement park, even if it's for a few moments and you can't see them or know where they wandered too? If that's happened to you, then you know the massive, massive relief it is to find them. I think we all understand the relief and joy that comes when what was lost is finally found.

Each of these celebrate with others because they found what they had desperately been searching for. The shepherd calls his friends and neighbors together...the woman does the same, and the father brings out a robe...not just any robe...the best robe. He puts a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet and throws a huge feast. He thought his son was dead...but now he's alive. He wants to throw a party to celebrate.

Here's why Jesus tells these three stories. He wants us to understand:

- *God has intense love for lost people.*
- *His relentless searches for them until they are found.*
- *When found, all of heaven celebrates!*

Listen to the deep committed love of God through the words of His prophet Isaiah 49:14-16. These are God's words spoken to the nation of Israel as he is proclaiming his plan to redeem them from their "lost" situation, *"Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not*

forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me."

[Illustration] - Illustrate a mother's intense love through story of Adam getting lost on the snowy mountain when searching for a Christmas tree.

Don't ever get fuzzy about this: God is passionate about finding those who are lost!

This is the reason our church exists: *To connect people to Jesus and help them grow to love and serve him.* This is the reason connecting people to Jesus is first in our purpose statement. The other priorities are certainly important, but connecting people to Jesus is our primary calling. Because lost people...really, really matter to God.

Here's a second important takeaway from these three stories: Since lost people really matter to God, then they must matter to us as well.

I think we should pause right here for a few minutes and do a gut check. What is the posture of your heart toward "sinners?" I know we're all sinners, but what is the posture of your heart toward sinners who are still lost and have not been found? Sinners who don't understand they are sinners. Sinners to don't know they are sinners.

As we wrap up, let's review four key lessons from these three parables:

1. *God Relentlessly pursues those far from him.*

Notice the shepherd didn't say to himself, "Well, he wandered off...now he's out in dangerous territory...he's probably gonna be in trouble or injured...serves him right...he should have never wandered off. Hope he finds his way back.

Instead, if these stories reveal anything, they reveal God's mercy, grace, and compassion. Friends...we serve a God who wants to be near us. A

God who goes the distance to ensure our safety and our freedom despite our sometimes-foolish choices to wander off.

[Transition] - This leads to the second important lesson...

2. *God is loving, compassionate, and forgiving*

The father's warm, gracious welcome and forgiveness of the prodigal son demonstrates God's loving nature and willingness to forgive and restore.

This is what we see throughout Jesus' life and ministry. He neither condoned sin, left people in their sin, or communicated any disdain for sinners. Instead, he invited them to receive God's forgiveness and participate in God's Kingdom.

Whatever we may take away from these parables, the initiating grace and acceptance of God displayed by Jesus must be evident in all we do.

Gut Check Question: Do lost, disobedient, and people different from you have any sense from you that God really cares about them? Can they sense from you that God is loving and warmly accepting?

3. *There is incredible Joy in heaven over repentant sinners*

These parables highlight the value God places on individual souls as is proven by the celebration in heaven when someone turns to Him.

I don't want us to miss the emphasis Jesus puts on joy and celebration in these stories. Sometimes it feels like we forget joy is an essential feature of God's people. It has been said, "Where joy is absent, the kingdom of God is absent."

[Quote] - German Theologian Helmut Thielicke (Tillicka) reminds us, "*How wretched it is to call oneself a Christian and yet be a stranger and grumbling servant in God's house.*"²

² Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*. p. 142.

Let's remember, joy is not an optional feature of the faith. It can't be attained by smiling more and singing louder. It has to emerge from a deep awareness of God's mercy and forgiveness that you have experienced personally in your own heart. We can't allow stories of lost being found ever become "ho hum."

[Illustration] - Story from our visitation team...

[Transition] - Finally, there is one more important lesson for us which is present in the third story...of the Father and his two sons.

4. We must guard against self-righteousness

The older son's attitude serves as a warning for us against self-righteousness. It reminds us of our need to stay rooted in God's mercy and grace.

As I shared at the beginning of this message, it's embarrassing to admit, but I act like the older brother far too often. My attitudes sometimes are very older-brother-like. I think the longer you have been around church, the more at risk you are to give off the "older brother" vibe. Maybe you need to check yourself this morning.

When I sense that in myself, I have to own it, admit it, and ask God to refresh me in humility and help me remember, but for the grace of God go I. Maybe you need to do the same today.

Conclusion/Response

I want us to take a few moments of quiet reflection this morning. As the music plays, I'm going to invite you to pray for two things:

1. Pray for love for "lost sinners" to grow in your heart.
In your own words ask God to make your heart pound for lost people.
If we're going to have any hope of reaching our redemptive potential

as a church and fulfilling God's assignment for us in these foothills our hearts must be aligned with God on this value.

2. For God to bring to your mind right now one or two faces of lost people in your circles of influence, one or two faces that he wants you to focus in on.

These are people that God wants to rescue through you. Last Spring Dr. Rick Mann encouraged us to practice CPR...Caring...Praying...and reaching out to those God has in our path and in our life orbit.

In this time...

Would you ask God to bring to mind the people he'd like you to CARE about in this season of life.

Would you be willing to...PRAY for them?

Would you be willing to REACH out...through a personal contact, a phone call, or a text...and just and check in on them?

Take a few moments while the music is playing and ask God to speak to you.