

All the tax collectors and sinners were coming to Jesus to hear him. ²But the Pharisees and the experts in the law were complaining, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

³He told them this parable: ⁴“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? ⁵And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶and goes home. Then he calls together his friends and his neighbors, telling them, ‘Rejoice with me, because I have found my lost sheep!’ ⁷I 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.

⁸“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? ⁹And when she finds it, she calls together her friends and neighbors and says, ‘Rejoice with me, because I have found the lost coin.’ ¹⁰In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

There are two kinds of lost people. There are those who know they are lost, and those who don't. The five-year-old girl at the store knows she's lost when she goes off to play in the aisles and now can't find her mom. She panics and cries. She goes around shouting, “Mommy! Mommy!” terrified that she will never see her family again. But the road tripping man may drive up and down streets he is unfamiliar with, unwilling to admit to his wife or to himself that he is lost. Today, Jesus speaks to both types of people. But which are you?

Jesus is surrounded with listeners, people interested in what the teacher has to say. But the crowd is divided. Some that gather around Jesus are labeled the “tax collectors and sinners.” These people had a reputation and they knew it. They were seen as the dregs of society, cut off, ashamed, and viewed as worthless. The Jewish religious leaders had strict orders not to try and help them, since they were beyond any chance of salvation. These people, the tax collectors and sinners, draw near to Jesus, just as they always do.

In the crowd are also Pharisees, people from the biggest Jewish denomination, who in many ways were considered the best society had to offer. They worked hard to keep God's commands, using their time and money to create a healthy and prosperous community. We often think of the Pharisees as the bad guys who were rich and greedy, but there's a reason why they were so popular with the common people, and that's because they lived as good neighbors to the everyday people. These people come to Jesus grumbling against him, like they often did. So, in this crowd are the opposite ends of society, the best and the worst, the leaches and the generous, the failures and the successes.

How can Jesus possibly differentiate his teaching so that he could speak to both groups at the same time? Well, Jesus tells a story. Two stories, in fact. In the first, a shepherd loses one sheep of his hundred-head flock. Jesus asks who wouldn't leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness to go after the one lost sheep. And when the shepherd finds his lost sheep, he throws it over his shoulder, carries it home, and calls all his friends to tell them the good news. In the second story, he asks what woman would lose one of her ten silver coins and not light a lamp and search through the night until she finds it, calling up her friends to rejoice with her when she finds it.

But honestly, how do these stories sound? If we're being completely honest, maybe we listen to them and conclude that these are not Jesus' best parables. To us, they don't make sense. Why doesn't the shepherd just cut his losses and move on? Why would he put his ninety-nine at risk for the one? It's bad logic. And why does the woman waste so much time to find her coin? Could she not wait until the next day instead of burning oil in her lamp to find it? It's only one coin. She has nine more. But Jesus talks like this is the obvious course of action. It certainly isn't the obvious course for the shepherd who sees his sheep as a commodity or the woman who doesn't see herself as a steward of that money. But what Jesus talks about here hits home with the shepherd who loves his sheep like pets, who has a name for each one and knows their individual demeanors. It makes sense to the woman who cares for every last coin that has been entrusted to her possession.

Of course, Jesus is not talking about sheep and he's not talking about money. Jesus is talking about souls. Notice that the shepherd seeks out the lost and devotes his energy to finding them. Notice how he carries the lost sheep home upon his shoulders. You know Jesus is talking about lost souls, so think about what he's saying about you and me. When we were lost in unbelief, or when we get lost in our sins or our doubts, he jumps into action. Our Good Shepherd, Jesus, seeks us out, even as we wander down the darkest and most dangerous roads. And when he finds us, he tosses us over his shoulders, the very same shoulders that carried the cross that won for us salvation. And like the woman tearing her house apart for her one coin, he seeks us with such aggression. You can't help but think of the last verse of Psalm 23: "Surely goodness and mercy will **pursue** me all the days of my life, and I will live in the house of the LORD forever." Jesus does not stop in his pursuit of the lost. And when he finds us, Jesus tells us, the angels rejoice in heaven.

How do the Pharisees in the crowd hear these parables? I can imagine they have a hard time relating to the shepherd or to the woman who has two weeks of wages to her name. But as they hear this parable, I would assume that they are looking at all the faces of the tax collectors and sinners. These are the people Jesus is preaching to, right? The people who are so lost in their villainy and despicable living? The people who betray their fellow Jews for the Roman empire

or who sell their bodies or who engage in lies? These tax collectors and sinners are the lost ones, so Jesus must be talking to them. And how foolish of Jesus to think these people can be found and rescued! They have thrown their lot in with hell.

These Pharisees don't think they're lost, but is that the truth? Were their hearts truly set on God their Redeemer? Or were the good things they did done with selfish and work-righteous motives? Ironically, Jesus is speaking to them just as much as he is to the outcasts in the crowd. But because of their pride, they don't hear it. They harden their hearts to Jesus' preaching of the law because they can't bear to admit that they are scoundrels before God, just like the rest. Still, the message of Jesus' parables certainly broke through to some, and they were cut to the heart over their sin and rejoiced that God's heart would be focused on them too.

But how do those outcasts hear it? Many of them probably carry around a hidden guilt. They hate what they see in the mirror and despise the people they've become. And as they hear Jesus' parable, they identify with the one sheep or the one coin. They know their lostness. They have for a while. But now they feel seen. Now they recognize that they have been found, found by the one who pursues the lost each and every day.

Which are you? As you sit here today, are you the little girl crying for mommy, lost in the vastness of the store? Or are you the arrogant driver, who refuses to even consider the fact that you might be lost? The message is the same for both. God doesn't let the lost stay lost. He seeks them out. He finds them.

But once you recognize the Good Shepherd's love for you, how does it change the way you look at your neighbor? We have people in our lives that we'd put into that category of "tax collectors and sinners." People who have made destructive choices in their lives. People who have faced difficulties outside of their control. People who have grown comfortable with sin and the unbelief that grows like mold on sin. And maybe there is part of us that grumbles at this section, just like the Pharisees, looking down on certain sins or believing that there are, in fact, people who are too far gone. We tell ourselves, "They don't deserve the gospel." But did any of us earn what Jesus won for us? Repent of that arrogance. God does not cut losses, because he knows the cost of giving up on a person. We ought not either, because people we know will perish lost if we don't have the courage and compassion to be the voice of Jesus, proclaiming the good news of the Good Shepherd.

But we also have people in our lives who seem to have everything together. We look at them and think, "They do not need the gospel." But this is not true either. And if they live with sinful pride, seeing no fault that is unsolvable on their own, their spiritual pride will lead to spiritual and eternal death. The Pharisees show us that no matter how together a person's life may be, they can still be lost in sin and unbelief. And Jesus, by sharing this parable with those he knew would not listen to it, shows us that even the most hardened unbelievers are valuable to the

Lord. He does not favor some of the lost over others. He loves them all, down to the very last lamb and the very last coin.

Your calling then, dear Christian, is to seek the lost so that they may be found. And it's not deciding which are more deserving of being found. Because none of us were. But that's what makes our God so much more than we could expect. He loves all the lost, seeking to make all of them found. So, whether the people you meet know they are lost and are seeking good news or have no idea that they're driving in circles, deliver to them this message of hope in Jesus. Then, join the choruses of angels in heaven who rejoice every time the lost are found. Amen.