

Heaven's Joy: Recovering the Lost

Luke 15:1-2

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We come this morning to an absolutely outstanding chapter in the gospel of Luke, and for that matter, in all of the Word of God, the 15th chapter of Luke's gospel. I have been looking forward to preaching through this chapter for many, many years. And I only get one crack at it so there's a lot at stake. And I have been reading in preparation for getting to this chapter, probably particularly and directly reading matter that deals with this chapter probably for the last five months or so. So I'm fairly well overloaded with information that I hope will enrich this great section of Scripture.

And I've entitled our look at this chapter and that title will prevail through the whole chapter: "Heaven's Joy Recovering the Lost." I could have titled it, "God's Joy Recovering the Lost." It answers the question "What makes God rejoice? And the answer is: When the lost are found. This is the joy of heaven, the joy of God, the joy of angels, the joy of the redeemed in glory, and it should be our joy.

What comes out in this chapter is how different Jesus was from the religious leaders of Israel. Jesus rejoiced in the salvation of the lost because as God He possessed that divine joy that belongs to the Creator and the Redeemer and comes in the recovery of the lost. He is in stark contrast to the religious leaders of Israel, who have no interest at all in the lost.

The great message of this chapter is: Heaven rejoices greatly, heaven celebrates when a sinner is saved, when a lost soul is found and recovered and restored. And by the time we're done with this chapter you're going to find your own heart tested as to whether or not this is for you the consummate joy. We find our joy in this world in a lot of ways. But if you want to get in touch with God and you want to share the joy of heaven, you're going to find your greatest joy in the salvation of the sinner, in the recovery of the lost.

As we look at this great text, you can examine your own life and test yourself and ask the question: Am I closer to the attitude of Jesus and, therefore, to God or am I closer to the attitude of the Pharisees and the scribes in the very opposite direction of God? That really is the question here. The Pharisees and the scribes, who were the leaders of Israel, found no joy in even approaching the lost, let alone seeing them converted. They were the worst kind of shepherds, the worst kind of religious leaders, the worst kind of representatives of God. And in contrast to them, we see our Lord Jesus Christ demonstrating the priority of heaven in saving the lost.

We don't often think about God's joy. When we think about God and we sort of look at His attributes, they fall into two categories. Typically, theologians have described them this way. God has certain incommunicable attributes. That is, those are things that are true of Him and Him alone. They don't get communicated to anybody else. For example, God is omnipotent. He possesses all power, infinite power, limitless power. God is omnipresent. He is everywhere at the same time at all time.

God is omniscient. He knows everything that is, that has been, that will be. God is immutable, that is, He never changes. And God is eternal. He is from eternity to eternity the living God. Those attributes of God are not communicable. We don't receive those. But there are other characteristics or attributes of God that are communicable attributes. He is righteous, He is holy, He is wise, He is loving, He is compassionate, He is gracious, He is merciful and He has communicated those to us in a measure. As human beings we possess elements of those communicable attributes and as believers we have received an even greater portion of those things by the work of the Spirit in us. We talk a lot about those attributes, God's righteousness and holiness and wrath and judgment and justice and on the other side, His wisdom, love, grace, mercy, compassion. But one of the things that is true about God that we don't often talk about is His joy. We get caught up in the fact that Jesus is "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief," as the prophet Isaiah said. We never, in the New Testament, hear of Jesus laughing, although we have already learned in Luke there was a time when He rejoiced greatly, in the 10th chapter. So we tend to sort of land on the stern, hard side of God and the grieved side of Jesus. But here in this great chapter, the theme is the joy of God.

Verse 7 ends the first story that Jesus tells and there are three in the chapter. And His words in verse 7 are, "I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." He's talking about joy in heaven, God's joy. At the end of the second story in verse 10, "In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." And now we add to God's joy the joy of holy angels. And then in verse 32 at the end of the third story, "We had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found." And the joy expands even more to all those who rejoice in the salvation of someone else.

This is about joy. This is about God's joy, the joy of the holy angels that surround His presence and the redeemed and glorified saints that dwell in heaven. That God possesses joy is obvious. Joy is a part of our lives. We know joy. We experience pleasure, delight, joy, laughter, happiness. Where did it come from? Well, it had to come like everything else, from the Creator, the source. In Romans 14:17, particularly, the apostle Paul says that "the kingdom of God is...joy in the Holy Spirit." That is to say that joy is a component of the kingdom of God dispensed by the Holy Spirit to those who are in the kingdom. In Romans 15:13 we read a benediction. Paul writes, "Now, may the God of hope fill you with all joy." God couldn't fill us with joy unless He had some to give. God, who is the source of joy, has joy in Himself to share. You remember in Psalm 51, David coming out of his terrible sin, asked God to restore to him the joy of his salvation. God rejoices. God experiences joy. And if you ask yourself in one of those moments when you're musing about why things are the way they are in the world and why there was a Fall and why there is salvation and why God is redeeming people through human history, you could ultimately come to the point: because it gives Him such joy. God delights in the recovery of sinners. And God shares that delight with all the holy angels and all the redeemed and glorified saints. And part of eternal rejoicing in heaven is going to be this endless chorus of hallelujahs because we have been redeemed. God finds His joy in the recovery of lost sinners.

It's not isolated to this chapter. Let me take you on a little bit of a preparation trip if you will allow me. Go back in the Old Testament to the book of Deuteronomy, the last of the five books of Moses, and the 30th chapter. God has not been reluctant to share with us the source of His joy. In the prior chapters in Deuteronomy, God told the children of Israel, who had now come into the land, that if they were obedient, they would be blessed and if they were disobedient, they would be cursed. And God knew which they would choose. And so in chapter 30 He writes, "So it shall be when all of these

things have come upon you," and by the way, these are the writings of Moses, but the words of the Lord God Himself, "so it shall be when all of these things have come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you call them to mind in all nations where the Lord your God has banished you..." He's saying, some day when you wake up and take a look at the curses that you have endured and, verse 2, "and you return to the Lord your God and obey Him with all your heart and soul according to all that I command you today, you and your sons, then the Lord your God will restore you from captivity and have compassion on you and will gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you. If your outcasts are at the ends of the earth, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there He will bring you back. The Lord your God will bring you into the land which your fathers possessed and you shall possess it and He will prosper you and multiply you more than your fathers. Moreover, the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, so that you may live." And He's talking about spiritual life and salvation and regeneration and a new creation. Verse 8 says, "And you will again obey the Lord and observe His commandments which I command you this day." And then listen to verse 9. "Then the Lord your God will prosper you abundantly in all the work of your hand, in the offspring of your body...the offspring of your cattle...the produce of your ground." Why? "For the Lord will again rejoice over you for good just as He rejoiced over your fathers if you obey the Lord your God to keep His commandments and His statutes which are written in the book of the law, if you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and soul." We're not talking about external religion, we're not talking about superficiality, we're not talking about a reinstatement of ceremony; we're talking about a transformation and salvation. What brings the Lord joy? It is the recovery of the lost. It is the salvation of sinners.

Again, the prophets understood this. Look with me, if you will, at several of the prophets. First of all, Isaiah, toward the end of his prophecy in chapter 62, because here again the Spirit of the Lord conveys a message that indicates the Word of the Lord to Isaiah. In chapter 62, verse 1 He is again looking at the future, at the salvation that will come to the Jews. He looks at a time when He will not be silent, He will not quiet. Verse 1 says, "a time when her righteousness goes forth like brightness and her salvation like a torch that is burning." Here is the prophet seeing the future salvation of Israel. This is what God looks for. "The nations will see your righteousness and all kings your glory. You will be called by a new name which the mouth of the Lord will designate. You will also be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, a royal diadem in the hand of your God. No longer will it be said to you, 'Forsaken.' No longer will it be said of your land, 'Desolate.' But you will be called, 'My delight is in her.' And your land will be called 'Married.'" That is to say, God will take you back as His bride, as it were. Here's the reason. "For the Lord delights in you." How much does He delight? Enough to marry you. Verse 5: "As a young man marries a virgin, so your sons will marry you; as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so your God will rejoice over you." God's delight and God's pleasure and God's joy is found in the salvation of lost sinners. God said it to the people of Israel when they were being told His instructions going into the land in Deuteronomy. It is reiterated again by the prophet Isaiah. He's not alone. Jeremiah echoes the same thing, Jeremiah, chapter 32. And this is so often overlooked that I want to show you these passages for your edification that you might know the heart of your God. Jeremiah 32, verse 37. There will come a time after Israel's punishment, after Israel's captivity, verse 37, God says, "I will gather them out." This is from the Lord Himself as verse 36 indicates. "I will gather them out of all the lands to which I have driven them in My anger, in My wrath, in great indignation. I will bring them back to this place and make them dwell in safety. They shall be My people. I will be their God," the future salvation of Israel. "I will give them one heart." Now we're back to the heart and the soul. That's always where the Lord is finding His joy, when the heart and the soul are transformed. "I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear Me always, for their own good and the good of their children after them. I will make an

everlasting covenant with them that I will not turn away from them," that's a covenant of salvation, "to do them good. I will put the fear of Me in their hearts so that they will not turn away from Me. I will rejoice over them to do them good and will faithfully plant them in this land with all My heart and with all My soul." God says I will rejoice over them with all My heart and all My soul. What makes God rejoice? The salvation of the lost, the recovery of sinners, the rescue of those who are perishing.

One other prophetic testimony to this joy of God is Zephaniah, about four books from the end of the Old Testament. The prophet Zephaniah writes in verse 14 of chapter 3, and there are only three chapters in this prophecy. Zephaniah 3:14: "Shout for joy, oh daughter of Zion! Shout in triumph, oh Israel! Rejoice and exult with all your heart, oh daughter of Jerusalem!" Something good's coming as the prophet calls everyone to rejoice. What is it? "The Lord has taken away His judgments against you," verse 15. "He has cleared away your enemies. The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst. You will fear disaster no more. In that day it will be said to Jerusalem, 'Do not be afraid, oh Zion. Do not let your hands fall limp. The Lord your God is in your midst, a victorious warrior. He will rejoice over you with joy. He will be quiet' or rested 'in His love. He will rejoice over you with shouts of joy.'" He's going to be quiet except when He shouts for joy. This is the heart of God. Very different, by the way, than what Ezekiel said. Three times the prophet Ezekiel says this, speaking for God: "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked." God has no pleasure in the death of the wicked. He finds His supreme joy in the salvation of the wicked. That's why in the wonderful teaching of Jesus in Matthew 25 to the faithful servants He said, "Come, enter into the joy of your Lord." Can you imagine being in heaven and having God shouting for joy over the fact that you're there? Can you imagine, right now, because you're in His kingdom, He is shouting for joy and the holy angels are shouting with Him and the church triumphant around His throne is joining in the cry. A party is happening in Heaven as we speak and it continues to escalate every time a soul is saved. Our Lord was a "man of sorrows" and He was "acquainted with grief," but He also knew joy. In His high priestly prayer in John 17 and verse 13 He said He wanted "My joy," He said to the Father, "in them." He knew joy. He knew joy even going to the cross because Hebrews 12 and verse 2 says that He endured the cross for the joy that was set before Him, that He despised the shame, thought it nothing, for the joy that was set before Him. And what was that joy? The joy of recovering the lost; heaven's joy comes in the recovery of lost sinners. Heaven's highest joy comes in that recovery.

As we look at our own lives, we might ask the question: "How important is that in my life, the recovery of the lost?" How critical is that to me? How...How do I find my highest joy? Is it in some trivial thing in this world? Is it in some temporal thing in this world, some insignificant thing? Or do I find the highest levels of my exhilaration and my joy and my satisfaction and my fulfillment and my delight and my pleasure in the knowledge that a sinner has been found and restored? That should be our highest joy.

That's exactly the point of Luke 15. It's a very convicting chapter. It is, in many ways, a devastating chapter. In it, our Lord tells three stories. You can go back to Luke 15 now. In it, our Lord tells three stories, but really they're just one story. It's the story of heaven's reaction when the lost are found. The first story is the story about a lost sheep. The second story is about a lost coin. And the third story is about a lost son. All three follow the same pattern: lost, sought, found, restored, and celebrated. That's the outline for all three stories. The first one is modestly long, seven verses. The second is brief, three verses. And the third runs all the way from verse 11 to 32. But even though they are different in their length and the features are unique, the story really is the same. We know these stories. We know the last one, perhaps, best of all. And it may well be the most powerful parable the Lord ever gave. I'd be hard pressed to think it any less than that. But there are nuances

in these three stories that make them so remarkable. This is the teaching of our Lord Jesus at its most profound and rich.

Now, before we look at these parables, I want to give you a necessary background. Now, look, we're going to spend some time in this chapter. I didn't live my whole life to get here to be done in two weeks. OK? And I'm going to wring out of this everything that I think the Lord would have you to know. But to begin with, there's some things that you must understand. I want to back away from the parables...and we're going to read the first one and set it up...but I want to back away and give you some things that are very important for you to know.

First of all, I'm going to give you three little points to keep in mind. Number one is clarity, clarity. Clarity is good, would you agree? Yeah, clarity means you get it. That's really important. And the question's going to be: How do I understand these stories? One is about a shepherd. He has 100 sheep. One is lost, he leaves the ninety-nine, he goes and gets the one, he brings it back, takes it home and they have a party. One is about a lady, she loses a coin, she searches for the coin, she finds it, she's thrilled, she calls her friends and they have a party. The other's about a father, he's got two sons, one goes away, comes back, they have a party. Pretty simple stories, and on the surface you might think there's not much to say but that would be a tragic assumption. Because the first thing you have to understand about a parable — and I want you to get this in your mind — these are not free-floating stories that can be attached in any time or place or culture. Whatever it meant, exactly, no less and no more, to the people to whom Jesus said it, is exactly what He intended it to mean to us and to every generation and every language and every culture since and until Jesus comes. It has one meaning; it has no other meaning. A parable, in a sense, is sort of like a political cartoon. You can only understand a political cartoon because it's a cartoon if you understand what's going on in your society. Right? You can imagine going to another era of history and another culture and looking at a political cartoon and being completely lost as to what its significance is. But if you're conversant with the issues in your society and you see a political cartoon, all of the sudden you understand it. You get it. Well, a parable is like that. The message was clear to the perceptive listeners living together in a common culture in which the story originated. Now, that sets a challenge for us. If we're going to get the clear meaning of these, we're going to have to reconstruct the culture. You know, I hear people all the time say, well, you know, we want to bring the Bible into modern times. We don't want this archaic Bible teaching. We don't want this verse-by-verse exposition of Scripture, this antiquated book, these old, sort of, agrarian images, etc. We want to update the Bible. We have a lot of people that want to translate it into some new paraphrase that's more contemporary or we want to just refer to the principles and not get caught in all the elements of the text. Listen: That is not what you do when you teach the Bible. That is not what you do when you convey the message of God. You don't bring the Bible into modern times ever. You take the people in modern times and put them back in the Bible. That's what you do. That is the only legitimate way to ever interpret the Scripture because whatever it meant to them is exactly what it must mean to us. And since there's such a huge gap between us and them, time, culture, society, we've got to reconstruct that so we know exactly what Jesus meant when He said it, to the people to whom He said it. One of the great losses in the evangelical church today is indifference toward historical context. So you have people just pop a story out of the Bible, tweak it a little bit, make it mean whatever they want in a modern era, change the terminology and the ideas and, consequently, you get something that's superficial and, perhaps, not at all related to what our Lord intended it to say. So to derive meaning from a parable, you have to come to clarity. And clarity means you have to reconstruct the cultural setting. That's the first thing to know. And that's true about any parable. And we've illustrated that as we've gone through the...the many parables that we have in the book of Luke.

Now, there's a second little "c" in my outline that I want you to look at and that's centrality, centrality. And this is just kind of an interesting thing to think about. The book of Luke is divided into three sections. OK? The first section is 1:1 to 9:50. The first section is chapter 1, verse 1 to 9:50. That section covers what we call the prologue: the introduction, the birth of Christ and the initial beginning of His ministry and the Galilean ministry. OK? That's the first nine chapters. Then chapter 9, verse 51 to chapter 19, verse 27 is His ministry in Judea. OK? That's the great Judean ministry, all the months leading up to the cross. At the end of that, as you come to the end of the 19th chapter and into chapter 20 and the end of the book, you have the passion of Christ: His death and resurrection, the events around the cross. Three sections: prologue, birth, ministry, Galilean ministry, the big middle section, which is the bulk of His teaching, twenty parables in this middle section. It's non-chronological. It's teaching from all different places and times in those months that He set His face, chapter 9, verse 51, to go to Jerusalem, and then 19:27 when He arrives there. This is the middle of the book. These ten chapters, as I said, contain more than twenty parables and they are, therefore, the heart and soul of our Lord's kingdom teaching. Interestingly enough, this chapter is in the middle of that ten. It's as if it's the peak. It's as if His teaching reaches its high point here. And I think the Holy Spirit designed it as such. This is really hitting the peak of our Lord's teaching. They are at the center of the section. That cannot be a coincidence. They are really the high point of all of our Lord's teaching collected in this section of Luke.

Now, I want to give you another "c" to think about, complexity, complexity. I don't want to push you away with this. These stories are not allegories. That is, they're not with hidden, mystical, secret meanings that nobody could know. But there are layers. There is complexity here. And it's a kind of...I don't know if this is sort of an oxymoron, but they are simple complexities. Here's what I mean. Our Lord's parables — and this would be true of all of His parables, but this is a perfect place to see this — our Lord's parables have layers. And always, the first layer is a story that everybody can identify with. They all knew what shepherds were. They all knew what shepherds did. That's why He talks about shepherds. They knew about coins and people losing coins. They knew about sons and fathers and inheritances and all of that. So they're always going to be stories. They're not obtuse. Listen, they're not fictional. It's not Harry Potter stuff. It's a simple, straightforward, earthy story that everybody identifies with. That's the first layer, the story. The second layer is the ethics. And there always is in these parables an ethical issue, an ethical issue that everybody would understand. The ethical issue in the opening story is: Did the shepherd do the right thing in leaving the ninety-nine in the open pasture to go and find the lost sheep, pick it up, bring it back, restore it? Did he do the right thing? That is the ethical issue. Same thing with the woman. Did she do the right thing, to stop everything, halt her life and go find that coin? Is that the right thing? And what about the father? Did he do the right thing in taking back the son that wasted his inheritance? When you think about all that the father had to give up to let the son do what he did and then to take him back, did he do the right thing? What is the ethical issue there? And the parables always have ethical issues. Those two things get the people drawn into the story and force them to come up with some kind of an ethical response. Then you come to the third layer, which is theological. And this is where Jesus moves them from what they do understand to what they don't understand. What are the theological implications of a...of a shepherd finding a sheep and a woman finding a coin and a father embracing a wayward son? What does this say about the kingdom of God? And then usually, the fourth layer is Christology. Where is Christ in this? Where is Christ? We know the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son are lost people being illustrated. We know the seeking shepherd, the seeking woman, and the seeking father represent God, the Seeker. We know the celebration of the friends represents the joy of God and the joy of the angels and the joy of the redeemed. But where is Christ? Where's the Christology here? Now, you're going to see that and it's profound and powerful and magnificent. You

miss all of this if you don't go through the clarity process to get back into the context. In all these parables I think our Lord hits the high point. These are the richest parables. This is the pinnacle. And I will give you this; they are gospel parables. OK? They are invitations to salvation. They really are. They're about salvation. And just telling a story about salvation, about being lost, being found, being restored and being celebrated by God, the angels and the redeemed, just telling that story in itself is an invitation for others to participate in that great reality. You can apply what I've just told you in the first point, clarity, and the third point, complexity, to all of our Lord's parables. The middle point on centrality is just unique to this. It's just as if God put them in the perfect place.

Now, before we look at the first parable, we have to look at verses 1 and 2. It's always a good place to start. Let me read them. "Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them.'" That precipitates the whole chapter. Unless you understand that, you're literally ripping these chapters out of their context. Look, the Pharisees and the scribes despised tax collectors and sinners. They despised them. I mean, this is an old deal going on here. We've seen it again and again. You remember back in Luke, chapter 5 and verse 29, Levi, or Matthew, gives a big reception for Jesus in his house. And there's a great crowd of tax collectors and "others," it says, the riff-raff, the scum. And "the Pharisees and the scribes begin grumbling at His disciples saying, 'Why do you eat and drink with the tax collectors and sinners?'" I mean it's... They were always on this issue. This was, to them, a flaunting of the law, it was a flaunting of the tradition and more than that, it was a flaunting of purity, holiness. This was a serious issue to them. And yet Jesus continued to collect these people around Him. The Pharisees wanted nothing to do with anybody in these categories. Now, the tax collectors were the worst because Rome was the occupying power, Gentile, idolatrous, and the Jews despised the Roman occupation, and tax collectors were Jews who had bought tax franchises from Rome to extort money out of their own people to fill the coffers of Rome. They were the worst of collaborators. They were the worst of traitors. They were the lowest of the low. They were not allowed to socialize with other Jews. They were not permitted in the synagogue at all ever. They were unclean. They couldn't engage in any social activity at all. And sinners, that's just the whole category of the irreligious and the unrighteous and all the riff-raff that they considered to be below them and beneath them. They never had any association with them at all. In fact, a little later on in chapter 19, when Jesus says He's going to go home and have dinner with a tax collector, they're so appalled, chapter 19, verse 7, "they all began to grumble" again, same word, "saying 'He has gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.'" That's a little hard to do evangelism with an attitude like this, don't you think? Now, how do you ever get to these people if you are not willing to associate with them? They accused Jesus of being a drunkard and a winebibber and hanging around with prostitutes and tax collectors and, of course, He did hang around with those people. He was not a drunk. He was not gluttonous, as they said. But He did spend His time with the very people they wouldn't spend any time with. You see, they had a whole theology of how this worked; kind of a social theology. The Pharisees and the scribes were the *Haborim*. They were the elite, the religious elite, where the tax collectors and sinners in that general category were known as the *Am HaAretz*. *Am HaAretz* means people of the land, the earthy people, the lowly, the outcasts; the base. And the attitude of the Pharisees was that they were so pure and so holy and so righteous that they couldn't get near these people for fear that these people would somehow pollute them. Anybody who was ignorant of the law, anybody who was ignorant of the tradition, anybody who was indifferent to the law and the tradition, anybody who didn't keep fastidiously the rules and scrupulously tithe and go through the rituals was considered unclean. And a Pharisee didn't go near those people. In fact, Pharisees essentially spent their time with only Pharisees. They had an old rabbinic rule. It says this, quote, "Let not a man associate with the wicked, not even to bring him nearer to the law." Well, that's really helpful. You're a teacher of the law and you can't associate with the wicked to bring them to the

law? They were so worried about pollution that they didn't even take the law of God to the people who needed to hear it. Now, this really found its sort of focal point at the meal table. Meals were big deals. They lasted a long time. People reclined, as you remember, and stayed a long time, hours. And, I'll tell you, if you were going to separate yourself from the *Am HaAretz*, if you're part of the *Haborim* and you wanted to stay away from the low-lives, you would never be found eating with them. The Pharisees were very careful about what they ate, how it was cooked, and they were equally careful about with whom they ate. The only time we ever see them inviting a non-Pharisee into their fellowship, you remember, was back in Luke 14 when they invited a man to lunch who had dropsy, which would have made him a cursed, unclean man. But they had a higher motive than their own purity and that was they wanted to trap and condemn Jesus and he was a fool to do that. But apart from that, they weren't about to associate with these kinds of people. Jesus told them they should. At that same luncheon, chapter 14, He said what you really should do is not just have a party or a lunch and invite all your friends and all the people who are in your own group, but you ought to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind and that would have been appalling to them, absolutely unacceptable. Then He went on at that same occasion to tell them a story about God having a big dinner and going into the streets and lanes and bringing in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame. And He was saying God is inviting into His kingdom the people you won't even have for lunch. Not only that, God is shutting you out of His kingdom because of your self-righteous, false holiness.

But look back at our text in Luke 15. The tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Jesus to listen to Him. Do you remember how chapter 14 ended? Just look up from 15. What were Jesus' last words? "He who has ears to hear" what? "let him hear." Well, the Pharisees weren't hearing. The scribes, the lawyers weren't hearing. Who was hearing? The outcasts, the riff-raff, the sinners, the tax gatherers. And it's a perfect transition. "Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear," and all the tax collectors...all, operative word, a large group, not all that existed, but all in the large sense...and the sinners and they were coming for the very purpose of hearing what He had to say. Why? Because He was from God and He would receive them and nobody else that represented God would. Let me tell you how bad this was. If a Pharisee...you had to hire...a Pharisee would hire somebody to clean his house or to grind flour. That would be somebody among the common people, the *Am HaAretz*. And the rabbinic law says that if you hire an *Am HaAretz* to grind your flour, you have a lady in there grinding flour in your house, if she's in your house grinding flour, as soon as she stops grinding, your house is unclean. As long as she's grinding, it's clean. As soon as she stops, it's unclean. Now, if you have two ladies grinding flour and one stops and the other keeps going, the house is not unclean, but anything the first lady can touch is unclean. This was developed and actually codified in A.D. 200 in the Mishnah, but was traditional through the years before. You say, well, where in the world did they get these ideas? Where did they get this from? Well, they got it from their own self-righteousness and then they looked in the Scriptures to find verses that they could twist and pervert. Here's one, for example, that they loved to use. Psalm 1, "How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners." I mean, they completely perverted that. They loved to take Proverbs 1, familiar words, where verse 15 says, "My son, do not walk in the way with them. Keep your feet from their path." They do wickedness. They do evil. It was just a twisting of Scripture. They loved to use Isaiah 52:11. "Touch nothing unclean. Go out of the midst...purify yourselves." They pushed that to the absolute extreme. And it showed up everywhere but, in particular, where they ate. Now, eating for them started out complex. They had to have all this kind of kosher diet. And they had taken what the Old Testament indicated was to be a proper Jewish diet and they had expanded it and embellished it. And it got to the point where — this is an interesting thing — they couldn't eat food that hadn't been tithed. They couldn't eat ten beans; they could only eat nine and one had to be given to the priest at the temple. I mean, it got down to the...You know, Jesus said, you tithe the mint and the anise and the cumin and all those little herbs. Sure, because they couldn't

eat anything that didn't get tithed. That's how ridiculously legalistic they were. The Babylonian Talmud lists things unbecoming to a holy Jew and one is to recline at a table with an *Am HaAretz*, a lowlife. Here's one that just blew my mind. Pharisees and scribes could not sit on opposite sides of a dining room, you know, at some event or some restaurant or some occasion. They couldn't sit on the opposite side of the dining room if anywhere in the dining room, even on the far opposite side, if somebody on the opposite side was eating meat and somebody else was eating cheese. Now, you remember that in the kosher diet you don't mix milk and meat. And that comes from the Old Testament law about not boiling a calf in its own milk. So one guy could eat all the cheese he wanted. Another guy could eat all the meat he wanted. That wasn't the issue. You got one guy eating meat and one guy eating cheese. But a Pharisee would have to get up and leave, because if he saw one guy eating meat and one guy eating cheese, they would mix in his mind and he would be guilty of defilement for having mixed milk with meat. Now, that's what they were thinking. The rabbinic law said you cannot even mix milk and meat in your mind. You couldn't touch the clothes of an *Am HaAretz*. You couldn't sell anything to one. You couldn't be a guest of one in their home. You couldn't have one for a guest. They were not ever together. You say, well, didn't the Jews give alms? Didn't they give money to the poor? Sure. They would send food to the poor; they wouldn't eat with them. So here comes Jesus. He doesn't care about any of that. He just receives the people who want to hear what He has to say. He doesn't care about their stupid legalism. And they're just irate. And so it says in verse 2, "Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble." That is an onomatopoeic word in Greek. *Diagogguzō*, bl-bl-bl-bl-bl-bl-bl-bl. You know, an onomatopoeic word is a word that sounds like its meaning. Mumble, mumble, murmur, murmur, they send this murmur around. This man receives sinners and eats with them. He doesn't just socialize; he eats. But the operative word there is receives. He hosts them. Oh, this is the ultimate. It'd be one thing to go at their invitation, but to host them. This is more than they can possibly bear. So they protest. And Jesus knows that this is a million miles from the heart of God, that God finds His greatest joy when an outcast sinner is saved. God finds His greatest joy when the lost is found and restored. And these Pharisees know nothing of God and nothing of God's heart. And so He tells three stories and they are powerful. And the first layer is the story and they would say, ah, we understand that story. And the second layer is the ethics. Yes, that shepherd did the right thing, they would say. They understood the value of a sheep if they understood anything. It's money. They knew what it was to make sure you found that sheep. And they understood a woman looking for a coin and they understood a father looking for a son. And they would affirm the certain elements of these stories and then the ethics of it. Was it the ethical thing to do? Was it the right... It was the right thing to do. And then the knife goes into their heart. Oh, well, if you're so concerned that it's right to find a lost sheep, a lost coin and a lost son, why are you so indifferent to lost souls? How far away are you from the heart of God? You see, this is typical of Jesus' parables. The story...and they get then...Then He gets them to chime in on the ethic and then they're dead. Then the knife goes in. And that's what we're going to see. They protest and they complain and Jesus unmasks them as being very different than God. A sheep, a coin, a son. One sheep out of a hundred, one coin out of ten, one son out of two. Maybe that's why the stories flow that way. We don't know. The sheep is dumb and helpless. The coin is senseless and inanimate. The son is rebellious and wicked. And they all illustrate the condition of the lost. The Father is always the seeker and He finds the one whom He seeks. And heaven always celebrates. This is the joy of God in salvation, the joy of God in recovering the lost. And we're going to see this profoundly rich story unfold in three little dramas that, I think, will be absolutely unforgettable. But the big message to leave you today is that I trust that in the process God is going to draw you closer to His heart so that you begin to find your joy where He finds His joy, in the recovery of lost sinners. Let's bow in prayer.

Father, our hearts are gripped by Your joy. We know that heaven rejoiced when we were saved.

Heaven rejoiced when this lost sinner was found, recovered, restored. Oh, Father, how we want to have Your heart, how we want to share that heart and abandon our own lives as Jesus did, to seek and to save that which was lost. We thank You for Your kindness and Your mercy toward us, toward those who know they're sinners, who know they're outcasts. We thank You that You receive sinners, of which Paul even said he was chief. We thank You that You find Your joy in recovering the lost. This is grace upon grace. And we pray, Lord, that You'll rejoice today and heaven with You, because some sinners who are lost will be found and restored. We pray to that end that Your work might be done in hearts even today. In Christ's name, amen.

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