

From God's Heart to Our Lives: Love for the Lost

Around 750-800 years before Jesus, God called the prophet Jonah to go preach to the ancient Assyrian capital city of Nineveh. But Jonah wanted none of it. The Assyrians were enemies of the Israelites. So instead of going, he went the opposite direction and tried to sail away. But God intervened and sent a storm. Jonah was thrown overboard and then God provided a huge fish to swallow Jonah and later spit him up on land. Then Jonah obeyed. He walked around the city preaching, *"Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown."* The city, with a population of more than 120,000 people listened. They repented! And Jonah 3:10 tells us, *"When God saw that they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he relented and did not bring on them the destruction he had threatened."*

So, wouldn't you think that Jonah would throw a party? "I disobeyed God! I was about to die! God saved me! Then he still allowed me to preach! And everyone listened!" In many ways, Jonah was one of the most successful missionaries ever. But the only party that Jonah threw was a pity party! When he saw that God did not bring the destruction, he prayed: "God, this is what I'm talking about! This is why I didn't want to come here! I know that you are compassionate and abounding in love! Take away my life! I'd rather die!" In Jonah's mind, if anyone didn't deserve God's mercy, it was these people. So, God came to Jonah and reminded him, *Should I not have concern for the great city of Nineveh, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people?"* God has great concern for the lost and he showed that here with the people of Nineveh.

So fast forward about eight centuries. *Tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus.* People hated tax collectors. The tax collectors were often viewed as corrupt, rich, greedy traitors who worked for the Romans and often overcharged their own Jewish people to make even more money. Along with them were sinners, people with the reputation of living against God's law and often having no concern about following God's law. So here is Jesus, the Messiah, spending time, teaching God's Word, and eating with people who had made quite a mess of their lives by their own sins.

Much like Jonah centuries earlier, the Pharisees and teachers of the law were bothered by this. You see, they were extremely religious people who tried to obey God's law and in their own minds even exceeded God's law by following their own invented laws. So, they saw the kind of

people coming to Jesus and they muttered, *This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.*” This is not a compliment by the way. They already didn’t like Jesus and were looking for more reasons not to like him, and they were disgusted by the kind of company that was coming to hear Jesus’ teaching.

Jesus, of course, knew what they were muttering, and so he told them three parables to demonstrate how God seeks and rejoices when lost sinners are found and brought to repentance: the lost sheep, the lost coin and the famous lost son. The lost son is not included today, but you could go and read this later today at the end of Luke 15. In the lost sheep, a shepherd has one hundred sheep. One is lost and so he leaves the other ninety-nine he goes after that one. And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders. He doesn't kick the sheep, beat it or scream at it. He carries it home and has a party to rejoice. Jesus then makes his point that just as a shepherd rejoices when he finds his lost sheep, so there is rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents.

Do you see the compassionate and joyful love of God here? Jesus is teaching the Pharisees: *“I don’t have the same attitude as you. My concern is so great for the lost that I seek out the lost and when a sinner repents- just as many sinners who are now coming to me will repent- I am happy. I am joyful. There is rejoicing in heaven.”*

Then he continues with the lost coin. A woman has ten silver coins, or ten drachmas. A drachma, or silver coin here, was worth a day's wage. She has about ten days of wages that she has saved. But she loses one, and she works hard to find it. Remember that at this time there wasn’t normal lighting, and a lot of houses had dirt floors that were uneven. So finding a coin would probably be a lot harder than finding one in our homes. But she lights a lamp, sweeps the house and searches carefully until she finds it. Then she throws a party and says “Rejoice, I’ve found my lost coin.” Jesus then makes the point that *“there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”*

Whenever a sinner repents, whenever a sinner turns to Jesus and his mercy, there is a party in heaven. I think of a soccer game I went to in Mexico. The home team came back from losing and scored the winning goal in the final minutes, and there was food, beverages being thrown all over the place. Air horns were going off. People high fiving each other. It was rapturous joy- for a soccer game. This is the kind of exuberant joy that is going on in heaven when any sinner comes to Jesus in faith.

Jesus was speaking these parables to the Pharisees and teachers of the law- those that looked down on others. How do we avoid this type of attitude? How do we avoid this type of attitude as a church? Is Mount Olive a place for desperate sinners to come and hear the message of mercy, compassion, and grace? Or is it a place for pretty good people to come and get advice on how they can get even better? Dear Lord, may it not be that! We must begin with an honest evaluation of the sin that is inside of us. The biggest problem is not the evil people out there in the world! The biggest problem is the evil inside of here. It's the self-centeredness that envies the success and blessings of others. It's the lack of fear of God and the constant fear of the next thing around the corner. It's the greed that thinks the secret to contentment is having more. It's the lack of patience towards our children or our spouse. It's the desire to listen to and spread gossip. It's loving the things of this world more than God. It's trusting in ourselves and our abilities for our security rather than finding rest in God alone. It's caring about our stuff more than caring that our unbelieving neighbor is on a path to hell.

Here is the truth: there is no one that entered the family of God by their own seeking out God. All of us who believe in Christ have been sought, out, found and rejoiced over by Jesus. Our Lord Jesus carried on his cross all of your sins to give you peace before God. Then he sought you out. Whether you have been a Christian for as long as you can remember, or rather recently, this was all the seeking out and finding of God, not a mere coincidence. Perhaps, you were born into a Christian family and baptized very soon after birth. You think, "Well, I was just born into a Christian family, that's why I'm a Christian." Theologically, that's not the entire truth. The fact of the matter is that you were searched out by God. God arranged things and your life's circumstances, so that you individually would be found by God. He arranged these circumstances for you. Or perhaps, you did not believe or aren't sure if you believed or were not very religious, and you met a Christian spouse and through this you came to faith. This is God seeking you out! Perhaps someone shared the gospel with you later in life, and you heard the message and believed- this was God searching you out and finding you! You were an object of rejoicing in heaven as the angels threw a party for you as you were brought into God's family.

It brings joy to God when any sinner repents and believes in him. It doesn't matter if they are a person who has made a complete mess of their life by drugs, alcohol, sexual infidelity, illegal activity, or insert whatever other sinful lifestyle might be repulsive to you. It doesn't matter if they are living without Christ and yet seem to have their life in order and are outwardly

successful, outwardly moral and are pretty good neighbors. Whatever situation it is, it brings joy to God and the angels when sinners come to him and find peace and refuge in his promises.

So how does God search out and bring people into his family? He does it through His Word. He uses people to speak that Word. He uses us. Where do we find the motivation to take that word to the lost? In parables like the lost sheep and the lost coin. Do you believe that those without Christ are truly lost and in danger? Perhaps you do know that, and are wringing your hands because you've missed opportunities, or you don't know what to say, or you don't know how to approach someone, or you had an opportunity and didn't know what to say. Dear Christian, take heart. Behind your clumsy spoken words of law and gospel, behind your prayers for your unbelieving friends, and in all of our imperfect efforts to reach the lost, is Jesus Christ. Sharing the gospel is not about you. Bringing people to repentance is not about you. Changing people's minds is not about you. It's about Jesus, searching out that lost sheep, sweeping the floor, lighting the lamp, and finding lost sinners. It's about Jesus and sharing in his joy.

Seeking out the lost is difficult work, but it's Jesus' work, and it is filled with the potential of great joy. Jonah didn't see this. He just saw people he didn't like. He didn't even want his message to work. But it was God's work, and so it did, even as it was spoken through a man with terrible motivation. And through this message, the city repented! But perhaps, the sheer number of the lost overwhelms you. You realize that it's not normal that an entire city repents and your paralyzed with not knowing where to begin. Brothers and sisters in Christ, see Jesus seeking out that one lost sheep and that one lost coin. Jesus hasn't given you, the individual, the job of making disciples of all nations, he gave that to His church, all his believers. But perhaps, in your life, you can think of one lost sheep. Maybe it's that friend that has wandered away from church. Maybe it's your neighbor who is living without Christ and without hope. Maybe it's the immigrant in your neighborhood who doesn't understand America and doesn't know Christ. Maybe it's your coworker who is doing very well and doesn't even know that he is lost. If you don't know where to begin, pray for one lost sheep. Prepare to share the gospel with that one. Pray for courage to share the gospel with that one. See Jesus seeking and finding, and by the grace of God rejoicing in one lost sinner repenting and finding joy and peace in Christ.