

God's Family Seeks Forever Gains!

A sermon based on Luke 15:1-7 – ***“Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”***

³ Then Jesus told them this parable: ⁴ “Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ⁵ And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶ and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ ⁷ 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.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

It was a sight like you wouldn't believe. They stood face to face, looking into each other's eyes for the first time in years. Two brothers, lovingly embracing each other. What should have been fists of anger and loathing were replaced by tears of joy...tears of love.

You see, they had had a storied past. One of the brothers, estranged from the rest of his family all by his own doing, because of his deception, stealing his brother's rightful inheritance from his father. And the other brother, years of stewing in anger, frustration, hatred, planning what pain he would inflict on his brother when/if he ever saw him again. I'm not sure any of them would have been justified in being the first to cast a stone. But when they saw each other after so long, all those wrong-doings, all those hurt feelings went away, replaced by a brotherly love...a love that you find in family.

You might recognize this story because it's one you've probably read about in the Bible, the story of Jacob and Esau, twin brothers separated because Jacob deceived his father Isaac into giving him the inheritance instead of Esau. But on that day when they were re-united, there were no feelings of hatred because of past sins. No, there was only love, the kind of love which forgives past sins and seeks to gain a solution to their problems so they could be a family again.

I'm fairly confident that thought never crossed any of the Pharisee's minds that day. You heard about it. Jesus was doing what Jesus does...preaching and teaching and practicing God's love. And his audience? Probably not the types you'd be too keen on keeping company with, either. “Sinners” and “tax collectors,” which today might look like hustlers, prostitutes, drug dealers, ex-cons...you know, not exactly shining examples of morality.

And the Pharisees, they couldn't even stand to have them in their presence. But Jesus? Talking to them? Welcoming them? Eating with them...these outcasts? He had gone too far!

He hadn't gone far enough.

“Let me tell you a story,” Jesus began. “I'm sure you could relate. There was a shepherd, out in the hills and the plains one day...just him and his 100 sheep. Well, not quite 100. You see, one wandered away.

The shepherd never saw it happen. He only noticed as he was rounding the flock up to take them back to the pen for the night...one was missing.”

“But, you know, having a hundred sheep, he was doing alright for himself. He was probably frustrated, but at the same time, you’d think he could afford to lose one for the sake of keeping the other 99 safe.”

“But he couldn’t. He wouldn’t.”

“I know it sounds unrealistic. I mean, you’re walking around town, you reach in your pocket for your cell phone, you drop a dollar on the sidewalk, notice it four blocks later when you wanted to pay cash instead of card for your coffee but saw you’re a dollar short, you’re not walking back to go look for that dollar. That would be an inconvenience. Or, you’re on vacation, you stop at a restaurant along the way to grab lunch, and then you’re a hundred miles down the road before you 5-year-old realizes she left one of her Paw Patrol figurines there; you’re not turning around. There’s just no sense.”

“Yet, against every ounce of sensibility...ignoring every crying bleat of the 99 sheep who were there and who needed him, too, the shepherd started walking. And shouting. And walking...and shouting. And walking and shouting and searching until a couple hours later, as the sun was still just barely hanging out over the horizon, he heard one familiar moan. And now he was running and crying tears of joy – yes, over one little sheep. He found her and slung her over his shoulders and sprinted back to the flock and took them home and called the neighbors over, “Come on over, we’re celebrating. I found my lost sheep (which they wouldn’t have even known was missing). Come on and share in my joy.” Joy because she was part of the flock. Joy because she was family.”

Do you understand Jesus’ point? Well, he actually spells it out for us, ***“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.”***

Again, do you understand? Jesus is pointing to a love for the lost that goes beyond anything human; it’s a divine love which seeks the lost...which seeks to find them and seeks to forgive them...seeks to gain them back to the flock...to family.

A love the Pharisees didn’t possess. A love Jesus longs for you to have and to show.

Have you? Do you?

I mean, we could talk about those horrible, godless sinners, the ones we see out there, the ones like here, where the Pharisees took one look at the crowd around Jesus and thought, “Uh-uh. No. They are beyond saving. To give them even a hint that God somehow wants them, no. No chance.” We’ll get to them later.

But first, can we talk about the flock? Can we talk about family? Because that’s where Jesus started.

Again, we’re God’s family here at Light of the World (and we’ll take all of you guests here in today, as well!). So, take a look around you (I know, again, this isn’t fair for some of you, but maybe think about your own church family). Again, take a look. There’s someone not here...someone who hasn’t been here for some time...someone you miss...family you miss. Or, maybe it’s a family member here who is caught in a nasty sin and they refuse to repent and they are straying from the flock.

How far would you go for them? How far have you? How far do you?

What do you do when people become delinquent, when they've disconnected themselves from their family here, and, even more importantly, from what their family gathers here to connect to ..to Jesus and his words of life? What do you do when they're straying...either from worship or maybe it's a specific sin? I mean, if Jesus is all about doing whatever it takes to seek forever gains for God's family, is that you, too?

Try this on. "Well, that seems like work for Pastor and the Elders – either the delinquent or discipline work. That's what we've called them to do, so they should take care of it."

"Hey, I'm here; that's all that matters. Their relationship with God; that's their own deal."

"My worship attendance record isn't spotless, either. I'm no saint over here. How can I do that – call them out - and not come out looking like a complete hypocrite?"

"We have a good, loving relationship. Why would I want to cause offense by bringing up a sensitive topic when I could say nothing...do nothing?"

"I know, if I just let this lie, they'll find their way back. They'll come back to worship...they'll repent on their own."

"Ah, you know, I tried once. Didn't work. There's nothing more I can do."

"I don't know why this should be such a big issue. So what, they haven't been to church for some time or if there's some big sin they've done. Their sin is no bigger deal than any number of people's here."

Or, maybe the worst: "Good. Let them. I never really cared for that person anyways. It's just one person. They're not worth it. We're better off if they just strayed for good."

What do you think? Would any of those match the mindset of the shepherd in Jesus' parable?

Have any of those ever been you?

You know, we call ourselves family. We call ourselves God's family. And yet, the sometimes lax, or indifferent, or loveless approach we've taken to care for and love others in our family – especially when they're straying and Jesus calls for us to be seeking forever gains...that's not family. At least, that's not God's family.

And then, we're no different from those Pharisees, of whom Jesus described as ***"ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent,"*** It was kind of a jab at them...kind of an ironic way of saying they thought they were safe, they were righteous, they had no need to repent...when they very clearly needed to...when we clearly need to.

You see, the truth is, we're the sheep who wandered away from the rest of the flock – whether we're the delinquent or the great sinner or the one who's failed – in whatever way – to be like that shepherd who goes after the lost and seeks those forever gains.

And then we hear words like this from Matthew's gospel, ***"When [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Matthew 9:36).***

And we're like them...like sheep without a shepherd.

Except we're not. They did have a shepherd. And so do we.

It's hard not to listen to a section of Scripture, like we have here in Luke, where it's talking about a shepherd and his sheep...it's hard not to hear that and not think about our Good Shepherd...the very one who shares this parable with us today...Jesus.

How far did Jesus go? After every one of us who ever strayed...so all of us.

For God's family, Jesus sought forever gains in every single one of us...and he did so lovingly, persistently, urgently, joyfully.

Jesus lovingly sought forever gains for God's family in you. How else can you explain every action Jesus took, from the time he left heaven to the moment he stepped out of that tomb alive, if not dripping with a love that only God could have for the loveless?

Jesus loved you enough to live the perfect life God demands of you but you can't...so Jesus did it in your place, never straying...not once. Jesus loved you enough to take that perfection and make it yours, while taking your imperfection and all of its horrible consequences and making it his own at the cross. Jesus loved you enough to make sure you have a place of forever joy to go to when you leave this world by rising from the dead.

Jesus persistently sought forever gains for God's family in you. Not only did Jesus push through all the suffering and torment on his way to and on the cross. He did all that to forgive, not just one of your sins, but for every time you have sinned and do sin and will sin. And he's in heaven, now continuing to plead your case, reminding his Father of his sacrifice for you.

Jesus urgently sought forever gains for God's family in you. Because he knew if you strayed for good and died without him finding you and you disconnecting from God's family, you'd be lost for good...outside of God's family forever. So, in God's perfect timing, Jesus came for you.

And Jesus joyfully sought forever gains for God's family in you. Because what pure joy there is in knowing that because of what he did for you, you've been found. You've been returned to the family. You've been won back for God's family. For Jesus, nothing was greater than. Nothing is more valuable to him than gaining you forever.

You see, not only from this parable but from the whole gospel history we know that Jesus spared no effort – no expense - to save sinners. He did not just care; he acted. He humbled himself. He fulfilled all righteousness. He did more than seek the sheep. The Good Shepherd laid down his life for the sheep. God raised him from the dead. And we were saved. And all of heaven rejoiced!

You know, the parable of the lost sheep describes not only heaven's joy at a sinner's repentance, how God invites careless, loveless, thoughtless people like us to eat at his table...how he found us and made us members of his family, to eat his supper with him in his kingdom, to celebrate forever the wedding supper of the Lamb (cf. Rev 19:7).

Jesus' parable also describes the priority he places on such a recovery mission. Jesus calls us to love the lost like Jesus both because of their place in the flock and because of their intrinsic worth in the eyes of God.

Seeking and welcoming the lost is the work of Christ's church on earth. The reason he leaves us here after making us citizens of heaven is he wants us to tell others, "Jesus welcomes sinners." He spares no effort to rescue sinners. And he wants us to do the same.

So, God's family seeks forever gains. We seek gains for forever...for eternity.

And when it's our Light of the World family (or your church family), we love like Jesus...which means we also lovingly seek, persistently seek, urgently seek, joyfully seek those who are straying...so that we can forgive and rejoice.

And when it's the lost (the horrible sinners or even those who just aren't connected to Jesus and to a church family), we love like Jesus...which means we lovingly seek, persistently seek, urgently seek, joyfully seek them because that's what our Good Shepherd does and now asks us to do for him.

God seeks forever gains in you. So now, God's family seeks forever gains. We seek forever gains for God's family. We seek forever gains for God. Amen.

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