

# God wants you back

## Luke 15:1-10

You know when you lose something that you just *have* to find? You're completely restless about it; you can't focus on anything else until it's back in place. We all know that feeling about house keys, right? You're heading out the door in a couple of minutes, but you can't find the keys. And you *need* them - you can't actually carry on with things until you find them.

When you *do* find them (which you almost always do, even if in my case it was two months later just after having paid for the locks to be changed...) - when you do find them, you're... relieved. That's it. There's no ecstatic feeling, no party to be thrown. You barely give it a second thought once you've got them back in your pocket.

I felt quite differently about losing my wedding ring once. Again, once I realised it was missing, I was completely restless - couldn't focus on anything else except finding it. But, unlike the house keys, I didn't *need* the ring to carry on with the day. It's just that I really, really *wanted* it back in my possession, because it really mattered to me very much indeed.

And when I did find it (having driven to a car park twenty miles away on a hunch that that was where I'd dropped it), the feeling was quite different to the key thing. Yes, there was relief. But oh, so much more than that. There was a certain joyfulness about having back what mattered so much to me.

When you read Luke 15:1-10, you get an insight into how God *feels* about you. And we discover that, to God, you're more like a treasured ring than some functional keys. God doesn't *need* you for Him to exist and function. But He really, really *wants* you. So we read stories about how finding us back where we belong with Him brings God joy. More than a relieved, 'Oh, that's good. Best get on' - God *treasures* us so much that He parties when we're back with Him.

This is the whole good news of the Bible that we have to share with you. *God wants you back home with Him, and He has gone to incredible lengths to make that happen.*

There are three key phrases in this short passage that get drummed into our minds enough to see that God wants us to think of things this way. The phrase 'lost' comes up five times. 'Sinner' comes up four times. And 'rejoice'

or 'joy' comes up five times. We're going to take a look at what each of these phrases has to say about where you are with life and with God.

*If something is lost, that implies that it belongs to someone.* A lost pet, lost keys, lost wedding ring, lost data, lost property - it's only lost because it was once in someone's possession or ownership, and it is so no longer. *The other thing that 'lost' implies is that the person who owns this thing wants it back.* You don't describe a coat that you give away to a charity shop as 'lost,' or data that you have deliberately deleted from your computer as 'lost.' It's just the stuff that you want back that you describe this way.

So when Jesus speaks in these parables about apparently ordinary things being 'lost' and searched for, He tells us that human beings like you and me really matter to God. We belong to God. But the 'lost' are those who aren't under God's ownership anymore.

You might be 'under new management' - perhaps you think that you belong to nobody but yourself. Or maybe that you belong to a person or a cause you've given your life to, or a peer group - or you may be drifting completely aimlessly. You might not want God, because you think you've got all you want. But God wants you back - and He pursues you with a restless, rescuing love.

Lots of people think they have a lot of time for Jesus and His teaching. 'I want to live a Christian life' or 'I think I've got Christian values.' But if you're going to buy what Jesus is saying, then you start by accepting that you were made to belong to God - nothing and nobody else. And most of our culture doesn't accept that at all.

Some people think they aren't lost. They think they are fine as they are. They don't see any *need* for God. And they don't *want* God. Keeping the head down with work, family, weekend activity - that'll do. In our time, a lot of these people will say, 'Well, I'm not particularly religious, myself.' And what they mean by that is that they don't go to church, and God isn't really a reference point for them.

But all 'religion' really is is putting your trust in performing the same regular rituals week in, week out. You can do it in church services; but you can also do it in other weekly routines. At work. With your family. At the football. At the pub. At the gym. Lots of people lean their security on repeated rituals of living. And they think they're safe there.

In Jesus' day, it was particularly religious people who thought they weren't lost. Pharisees and teachers of the law, v.2 tells us, were complaining about the 'sort of people' that Jesus was spending time with. They were so proud about not being 'lost' that Jesus challenged their thinking with these parables.

The bottom line is, if your starting point is 'I'm not lost; I'm fine,' then you're not going to listen to another thing I'm saying, any more than these guys listened to what Jesus Himself said to them. Whether you think you're good enough for God already, or that God's not good enough for you, good luck to you out there hurtling through life keeping your head down until the inevitable.

Some people *feel* lost - but they can't put their finger on it. They can't explain this sense they have that everything's not right. There's an emptiness. Or a directionless-ness. An unexplained anxiety that's just *always* there. A burden. An internal struggle hidden behind the mask of, 'Good, thanks, how are you?' Something like a homesickness.

That's the other sense of 'lost.' When you realise that you are not where you are supposed to be. When you are so far from safe and familiar roads that you know head the right way, that you can't see where they are or how to get back. Lots of people are living that way, and hiding it really well.

If you are one of these people, Jesus says to you in these parables - 'Yes, you are lost. That's because you belong to God. Your homesickness craves a home. And I've come to bring you home to God, because He *really* wants you back. Come with me!'

Once you get as far as admitting to yourself that you're lost, you can admit to God that you're lost, too. And once you get as far as realising that this being 'lost' is because you belong to Him, but you've been living under your own ownership instead of His, you can accept Jesus telling you that 'you belong to God, and He really wants you back.'

And once you get as far as believing *those* things, you can have total confidence that God has done *everything* necessary to bring you back to Him. In the parables, the shepherd goes after the lost sheep *until* he finds it. The woman sweeps and searches painstakingly for the coin *until* she finds it. God does not quit until the job is done. And the job is 'to seek and to save the lost' - that's Jesus' own job description a few chapters on in Luke 19:10.

There's another kind of people - those who know they have been found. Those who have confessed: 'I belong to God. I was once lost and far off and

not under His ownership, but now Jesus has brought me safely home to belong to God now and forever.' You can't sing Amazing Grace and mean it until you've reached this place. I know that many of you are those people. My prayer is that there will be many more of us. Because there are a lot of lost people amongst us.

*Do you see yourself as lost? Found? Neither?*

If I were to describe you as a 'sinner' - how would you react? Instinctively, I bet a bit of you would get angry. 'How dare *you* call *me* a sinner!' It sounds damning, judgemental and divisive. There are safer, softer words that we like to use these days - in the world and in the church. 'Messed up' (that's one I keep using in sermons...), 'flawed,' 'very human.' 'Sinner,' though? Steady on, that's a bit much, isn't it?

In vv.1-2, we read about Pharisees and teachers of the law 'muttering.' Huddling, whispering, judging. The 'good' crowd gossiping about the people they've written off as hopeless. They're complaining that this Jesus 'welcomes *sinners* and even *eats* with them.' 'Have you seen the sort of person that Jesus is hanging out with? Unbelievable!'

Now it's always good fun (for me at least) to spend a bit of a sermon slagging off the pompous attitude of people who think they're better than others - something that you see plenty of in leafy suburbs, school gates and workplace politics. Let's take that as read, because we do this quite often in sermons about how Jesus sees people differently.

The thing that stuck out for me this week reading this passage was that Jesus doesn't challenge the language they use here. These Pharisees has no right to call others sinners; but Jesus, the perfect Son of God, had every right. And that's exactly what He called the people around Him. Look at vv.7 and 10. 'Yes, these people I'm with are sinners. They are people who are guilty. Guilty of wrongdoing that has hurt others and themselves. Guilty before God in their thoughts, speech, actions and attitudes.'

'But,' Jesus says, 'God *loves* sinners.' Do you get that from this passage? You hear the word 'sinner' and recoil, like you're being told that you're too dirty for God. But Jesus uses the word 'sinner' - for you, and for me - for all the people who are gathering around Him, attracted to Him - and He says, 'God *loves* you. He *treasures* you. He *wants you back home with Him.*'

And so it is that God does everything it takes to bring His treasured sinner back home. The shepherd doesn't quit until the lost sheep is found. The woman doesn't quit until the lost coin is found. And God did not and has not quit pursuing you. So much so that Jesus, after living a life that attracted sinners like us because of its perfection and fulness, after telling us urgent and moving stories of God's love for us - Jesus went to a cross.

This was the length that God went to for you. In the same breath that God says, 'You're a sinner,' He adds, 'and I love you so much.' In the same Bible where God writes to us that 'your sin cannot be in my presence,' He adds, 'so I'll give my Son to take your sin on Himself and die with it on a cross.'

You are a sinner. So am I. As long as we think of the word 'sinner' only as a label that others give to us; all that will happen is we'll get offended and dismiss the word. But when we start reflecting for ourselves on whether it's a truth about us; we will begin to get somewhere life-saving.

Accepting that you're lost means accepting that you are a sinner. We stop puffing out the chest and pretending we're as good as we make ourselves appear, as we tell ourselves we are. We get real about the really dark thoughts, attitudes, self-serving motives, poisonous words and damaging actions we are actually guilty of. And we say, 'okay Jesus - I need your forgiveness. I need that death you died.'

From God's end, He has gone to every length to search you out, find you pursue you to bring you home with Him. But Jesus speaks about something you do at your end of things too. At the end of each of the parables, in vv.7 and 10, He says that this image of a lost, treasured thing being found and brought home is what happens when 'a sinner *repents*.'

To 'repent' is to 'change your mind; change your direction.' It's to deliberately stop going the way you're going in life, and head towards God instead of away from Him. It's doing a U-turn, and not just going a *different* way now, but going the way that God shows you.

And Jesus explains to the Pharisees in this passage, 'you don't do that by being raised a good person or by keeping the rules better. You do it by coming to me. That's what these sinners you are complaining about me hanging out with are doing. They're coming to *me*. They know they need *me*. *That's* repentance. *That's* the way back home to God.'

There's stuff in our lives - sinful stuff - that has to *go* if we're coming home to God. And there's stuff that we've neglected - things around worshipping God, having compassion for the needs we see, and plenty else - that needs to *grow* if we're coming home to God. But the starting point for all of that is 'gathering around Jesus,' as the sinners are doing in v.1. That's where lost people get found. They 'follow Him.'

*How can we begin to talk to lost people about 'sin' and 'repentance'?*

*Mini-sketch: The checklist*

If you think that this is how God sees it when lost sinners repent and come home through trusting Jesus, that's not true at all! If we as a church have given you that idea, I'm really sorry. God's not sat in an office with a checklist, aloof about whether you're home with Him or not, like all you are is one in 6 billion projects in His in tray.

These parables Jesus tells give us a glimpse into the heart of God. How He *feels* about finding you and having you home. He is *at least* as emotional as you are about it. In both these parables, and in the parable of the lost Son that comes next (which we'll look at in a few weeks); it's the *Shepherd*, the *woman*, and the *Father* - the characters who represent God - who get most emotional about the great thing that has happened in having the treasured one back.

The word 'rejoice' or 'joy' comes up five times in our passage. Repeatedly, Jesus says that when lost sinners come home to God through Him, God is absolutely ecstatic. He is partying; He is celebrating joyfully. *He celebrates you!*

And this isn't a quiet, private celebration. In Jesus' stories, the friends and neighbours get called round. God wants everyone to see, 'Look! I got my treasure back!' God loves and treasures you, and He is *proud* of you! He wants everyone around to see, 'Look! This is my son, this is my daughter! They're home with me!'

This... *this* is how God feels about you. He longs for you, thirsts for you. When you're lost and apart from Him, His heart beats faster at the thought that you're not home with Him. When you admit you're a sinner and you turn around and put your life in Jesus' hands, He throws His arms wide open, He throws His home wide open, and He throws a party in Heaven! You are

highly valued, much treasured, deeply loved, incredibly special. *You matter to God.*

So if you're listening to this today as someone who has not yet come home to God, can I plead with you to see how highly God values you, and how much He wants you. To see that the word 'sinner' is realistic, not dismissive. To see that God loved you and me enough that Jesus died on a cross whilst we were still sinners. And to see that God is more emotional about your current lostness, and also the homecoming you could have, than you ever realised.

As Tim Keller puts it, 'You are more sinful than you could possibly realise. But you are more loved than you could possibly imagine.' For your part, there's one thing that God seeks for you to do to come home: Repent. Turn around and come home to God, through 'gathering round Jesus' as so many of us here are doing. And begin to experience the new life of 'being found.'

And if you're listening to this as someone who has been found, here's three thoughts for you. Don't be offended by Jesus' priority for the lost. Let's learn to share God. In v.4, the shepherd in Jesus' story leaves 99 sheep in the 'open country' to go find the one lost one. We're not told if there's anyone else looking after them - it doesn't matter, because they are not the focus here. And that's the point. The focus is on reaching the ones who matter to God so much and aren't home yet.

The second thought is this - Jesus actually wants us to join in with that focus and agenda. As His disciples, we are to learn to search for lost people, as He did. He starts His story in v.4, 'Suppose one of *you* has a hundred sheep and loses one of them...' As readers of the story, we're invited to see ourselves as the *shepherd* in the story.

There might be 99 'found' people in your life - fellow Christians here in our church family, other friends and family who know Jesus. But who is the one lost person in your life that you are relentlessly pursuing in prayer, patient watchfulness for opportunities for conversation, invitations to church? Who are you going to great lengths for to reach them with news about lostness, sin, repentance, homecoming and God's celebration of them?

And the third thought is this - we've got to learn to celebrate more! Specifically, to be absolutely thrilled, and to show we are, when people decide they want to follow Jesus too.

*As a church, how can we celebrate people coming home to God more?*