

LUKE 15:1-10
LOST AND FOUND – REJOICING AND REPENTANCE!

A young offender with an ASBO who never even thinks about God.
A teenager who goes to Church sometimes, but doesn't believe in God enough to change the way he lives.
A youth leader in Church who is married but his marriage is under strain and he has fallen for someone else.
A 24-year old man who says he will turn to God when he starts a family.
An 11-year old girl who thinks God is for old people.
A middle-aged New Age worshipper who thinks the devil is just as interesting as Jesus.
A pensioner who has been a Sunday school Teacher, a member of the Church missions committee, an active elder, but is now complaining that God lets her suffer too much.
A 40-year old who thinks that all religions lead to God.
A wealthy businessman who has everything he could ever want or need and thinks that God is irrelevant.
Someone who has attended Church for 30 years but never quite managed to grasp what faith is all about.
One of the people who wrote part of the Bible.

Who of these would you describe as 'lost'? If you were to be asked to put them in order of 'lostness', who is most lost? Is there anyone who should not be on the list at all? In fact, if we take Jesus seriously, all of these people are or have been 'lost' at some time and stage in life. We think of people with no faith, who don't know God in Christ, as lost; they are the 'lost sheep' and need to be 'found' by Jesus and come to faith. But, it is also possible for Christians to be stuck in blind alleys, to get so weighed down by the pressures of life, or to get into situations that are completely wrong and we can be helpless, and can't see way out of the situation, and we'd describe these as people who are 'lost', that we need to be rescued by the grace and love of Jesus. Stay with me because there's rescue, healing and a remedy here.

Jesus was in the firing line; he was being criticised for His work. People thought He was spending time with all the wrong people. *"Now the..." (15;1,2)* There was a lot of muttering. Notice how muttering is the preferred option when people want to criticise – not so much out in the open criticism that can be dealt with and answered, but 'muttering' in the background that is designed to, and has the effect of, undermine and take away from, in this case, Jesus' ministry. What was the muttering about? Well, the people Jesus was spending time with; these were the wrong kind of people, according to the religious people! *Tax collectors*: they were collaborators with the Roman government, thieves who made themselves rich at other people's expense, greedy; and all the way through the Gospels tax collectors are given a bad press. *"Sinners"*: it is such a pejorative word; it has inverted commas around it in the NIV; you have to say it with a sneer in your voice to get it right! Because it is a word that makes you look down on people whose lives are just so bad and such a mess and who need to sort themselves out!

Jesus was spending time with these people; He was doing more than that, He was eating with them! Sitting around the table, eating, was even worse than spending time with them because eating with them suggested some kind of acceptance of 'these people'. Hold on, one of Jesus' closest friends was a tax collector: Matthew/Levi had been sitting beside the road collecting tolls from passing travellers and Jesus came and said *"follow me"* and Matthew did follow Jesus and every account of his story tells us that Matthew held a great banquet that night for his

friends and Jesus came. Now there is no great leap of imagination to suggest that all of Matthew's friends were people like him, tax collectors, outcasts from normal society and there was Jesus right in middle of that crowd, eating and drinking with Matthew's friends.

The Pharisees are the religious leaders of the day; they are the custodians of the law and of what is right and good and proper, by their own lights. They see Jesus and hear His claims to be the Messiah, but they mutter because in their eyes, He is meeting the wrong kind of people and eating with the wrong kind of people. There are all sorts of stories in the gospels that we could add to that evidence. By their lights, Jesus is out of order! So He tells these 3 parables, of the lost sheep and the lost coin and the prodigal son to challenge His critics to see "What is God doing?" He challenges them to see that God looks for people who are lost. Pharisees, by their attitude, had written off the tax collectors and "sinners" as beyond the pale; they had put themselves beyond the pale, outwith the reach of God and His grace; Jesus says that it is precisely for people such as these that He has come into the world.

These two stories are very simple stories, everyday stories. The shepherd loses a sheep that has wandered off; he only has 99, so where is number 100? He doesn't know, so off he goes to look for the sheep and takes no rest till he finds it. When he finds it he brings it home and has a party with his friends. It is the same story with the woman and her lost coin: it might be simple money that she couldn't afford to lose; some suggest that these might be special coins that made up her headdress on her wedding day and so are valuable in a different way; nonetheless, she sweeps the house till she finds it and then she's on the phone to her friends and neighbours and they have a party to celebrate, with a coffee and a scone – *"rejoice..."* (15:9) We say this over and over again, but remember that the parables have one point to make and here it is, for both of these parables make same point: *"I tell you..."* (15:7, 10)

There is something about the word 'sinner' that gets under our skin and irritates us. We use it to describe people who have committed a major crime, or some such. So because we apply it to people in that kind of a way, it doesn't apply to us; its 'them over there!' Actually the Bible describes sin in a number of ways: its about missing the mark; about neglecting good things at times; about turning our backs on God, either through neglect or deliberately; about falling short of God's good standard for people's lives. When we begin to see the notion of 'sin' as the Bible actually describes it, we begin to realise that we've all been there; we've all missed the mark at some time; we've all neglected good things at times; we've all fallen short of what we should be.

The thing is: these 99 people who don't need to repent – they don't exist! They may not think they need to repent, but that's a different matter. "I've not done anything major wrong!" You might be sitting saying that! "I've not committed any major crime; my life is sorted, on the right track, perfect!" That was the Pharisees' attitude; they were sorted because they kept all the rules and laws of God assiduously so they saw themselves as these 99 righteous people with no need for repentance. But this sense of sin and lostness touches every one of us. None of us is immune; there are no 99 righteous people who don't need to repent; they don't exist; we all need to have repentant hearts, though we may simply not recognise it. Repentance is first of all about recognising a need; *"here is..."* (1 Tim 1:15) The "worst of sinners"? The first stage is to recognise that these words might just apply to every one of us; if you bristle and squirm and say "that's never me!" then you've not yet understood what Jesus is saying and what sin is and how there is a part of our human nature darkened by sin. If you recognise that this might just be you, that's repentance; then we go on to confess our faults and failings and mistakes to God.

Jesus came to save and rescue us. Like the shepherd, like the woman, Jesus came "to seek..." (19:10) He came to preach the good news, to tell us about God's grace, His love to people who don't deserve it. Jesus came to meet people and show them the love of God in action. Ultimately Jesus came to give His life on the cross to take away sin. People respond to that good news and respond to the love of God and respond to Jesus with repentance and faith and when we do that, God rejoices. There is a glorious, exhilarating, overwhelming joy in God's heart when one of us comes to Jesus in faith; it is as if there is a great party in heaven when someone comes to faith in Jesus. This was exactly the reason for Jesus' coming, to change the world by changing people's lives. Did he spend time with the wrong people? No! It was for people who recognise that they are lost that Jesus came. I once visited an alcoholic who was in a bad way; later that day, my wife has an anonymous phone call in which the person said "why is he bothering with him?" I hope that I was reflecting something of Jesus and the person on the phone was just as lost.

The Young man with the ASBO finds that someone cares about him just as he is and why he offends. The Youth leader finds that there is a way out of the dark alley that has almost ruined his marriage. The elderly Christian in great pain finds that the God in whom she has always believed understands her suffering because Jesus died on the cross. The business man who thought he had everything in life, discovers that there are things money can't buy, but these are free for faith in Jesus. The person who has been religious all their life, discovers that faith is about being loved by God and loving Him back, about a personal relationship with the Father. People find that there is a way back to God from the dark recesses of life and its struggles, that God hasn't gone away, nor has he given up the search, but is still out there looking for them to bring them home.

Here's a CV for Paul: *Name:* Paul of Tarsus. *Former Name:* Saul of Tarsus. *Religion:* Jewish. *Denomination:* Pharisee. *Education:* university of Gamaliel (good qualifications). *Work History:* persecutor. *Recommendation from former employer:* Saul is a great persecutor; he enjoys applying violence and mindless thuggery; he is particularly motivated to persecute Christians. For Saul, to persecute Christians was not a crime; in fact there was a time when he thought he was doing God's will by throwing Christians into prison. "Saul, are you lost?" "No way! My life is on the right track." Listen to what he says about what happened next: "*Even though ...*" (1 Tim 1:13, 16) This is our God: with unlimited patience, searching for people who are lost, bringing us good news to rescue us, to help us find life in all its fullness; as we acknowledge our lostness and embrace Jesus, there is great rejoicing in heaven. Jesus is the 'friend of sinners' indeed; and He is this for all of us! God does not share our prejudices; there are no 'wrong kind of people' for the gospel; the gospel is for all of us, for we all need His grace!