

Part 55: The Eternal Joy of Repentance

Jonathan White | Luke 15:1-10

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Imagine with me for a moment, that you perceive of yourself to be in good physical health, with no major illnesses that you know of. Now imagine that you've scheduled a routine physical with your doctor. You get to your appointment and everything seems to be going well until your doctor glances at your file and says something like, "We've got great news for you! There's a cure!" Your response will be determined by your knowledge of your well-being, which will lead you to reject the treatment that is offered to you, because you don't have the disease.

Now imagine a different scenario, in which you have been struggling with an illness for years and years. You've had countless appointments with specialists. Tests, scans, and bloodwork all point to an incurable disease. In this scenario, you're headed to another one of your many appointments, not for a routine check-up, but another visit where you're expecting still more of the same bad news.

But this time, your doctor comes in with a hopeful smile on her face. This time, she reveals that a new treatment option is available that is a fool-proof, guaranteed cure for the thing that has been attacking your body for years. Do you think you might receive *this* good news a bit differently than in the first scenario? Can you imagine the tears of joy streaming down your cheeks at the prospect of good health? Even before beginning treatment, you would feel such relief and hopeful anticipation, regardless of the difficult journey ahead.

Sometimes, well-meaning Christians start a presentation of the gospel with a phrase like, "Jesus loves you." The problem is, without a right understanding of the bad news of our sin in front of a holy and just God, the good news of the gospel makes no sense to anyone.

You can't possibly want the cure unless you know you have the disease.

In today's text, there are a group of people who have no idea how incredibly sick they are. They are beyond delusional about their proximity to God, thinking that because of their ethnic heritage and strict religious practices, they are God's true people. We're looking at two parallel parables today, two stories that work together to communicate the same big idea: that **Jesus seeks, saves, and celebrates repentant sinners**.

Which we'll look at in 3 points: 1. **The necessity of repentance** 2. **The agent of repentance** and 3. **The Joy of repentance**.

Let's read the passage together one more time. **Luke 15:1-10**.

Our first point this morning will look at the **necessity of repentance**.

At first brush with these verses, it would be natural to draw some conclusions about the meaning. In fact, I'd guess that if you've been a Christian for long, you may have heard in another sermon that the main point of this passage is Jesus' relentless love for the individual. You may have even heard that famous quote in relation to this passage that if you were the only person on earth, Jesus still would have come to die for you. After all, he leaves the 99 in search of the 1 lost sheep.

There are certainly elements of what I just said that are true, but is it the PRIMARY thing Jesus wants us to see here? This is where careful Bible reading can help us out. I want to draw our attention first to Jesus' audience. There are two groups of people mentioned in the first few verses who are drawing near to Jesus. One group draws near to hear his teaching, the other draws near to criticize and question him.

The first group are tax collectors and sinners. In **Luke 14**, at the end of the passage Paul preached last week, do you remember Jesus' final words after his hard teaching on the cost of following him? "He who has ears to hear, let him hear". It would seem that those most receptive to Jesus' teaching, even his hard words about bearing their cross to follow him, are these publicly known sinners.

But there's a second group of people who are coming near to Jesus. The pharisees and scribes, the religious elite, come to Jesus to grumble and complain about his proximity to these sinners. Notice the language of the pharisees in **verse 2**, "this man receives sinners and eats with them."

In our world, it's hard to imagine someone making a fuss over something like this. Our culture has a theoretical category for this kind of hospitality as Tyler mentioned a few weeks back, though more often than not, we like the idea more than the practice of it. But in middle eastern culture, hospitality was and is a huge deal. For a person to "receive" another person carries with it the weight of belonging and affectionate care.

At the time, a prominent person might have opened their table to feed people in need, but rarely if ever would they actually sit down to eat with someone of a different status than themselves. It would diminish their place in society to be associated with the lowly. And here, Jesus condescends yet again, to gather with and receive those viewed as "unclean".

In Luke so far, the pharisees have already been rattled by Jesus teaching as he claimed equality with God. And now, to add insult to injury, he's dining with these unclean, unholy people. So, Luke records these parables as Jesus' response to the pharisees. The pharisees and scribes are the target audience here, not primarily the tax collectors and sinners, which changes how we look for the meaning.

In both the lost sheep and the lost coin, we are presented with something that is not where it's supposed to be. Let's consider what lostness looks like for each of them.

I am not a shepherd, nor have I spent much time around sheep. But from what I understand, they are generally helpless creatures. A sheep strayed from the flock is vulnerable. Being in a dangerous setting, the sheep is going to lay down and surrender to the hopelessness of the situation. Apart from the protection and guiding of the shepherd, the sheep is destined to wander aimlessly, suffer attack by predators, and eventually die.

Jesus pointedly describes people this way in **Matthew 9:36**, where he looks out at the crowds of lost people around him and sees them as "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."

In the lost coin, the woman sets out with a light and her cleaning supplies to search and sweep every dark corner of her house to find an inanimate object. Coins aren't alive. They have no will to do anything but even if they did, they have no legs to move them where they want to go.

A lost coin cannot make itself be found. It is lost. This coin didn't have an airtag on it that could respond to a beacon from your iphone. Apart from the illumination and scouring of the house BY someone, this coin will be lost forever.

So what are we to see about the state of both the sheep and the coin and what does that tell us about people? Both the sheep and the coin are helplessly, hopelessly lost. Both are unable by any stretch of the imagination to improve their situation without outside intervention. Both are as good as dead and headed for destruction.

The apostle Paul, in one of the most quoted chapters of the Bible here at Sovereign Hope, describes all of us similarly. Look with me at **Ephesians 2:1-3**.

Paul, led by the Holy Spirit, makes it personal... We were all dead in our sins, living like mindless zombies, driven only by our flesh, in pursuit of our selfish desires, inadvertently following Satan, children of wrath, like the rest of every single other person on the planet. No one gets a pass here.

But in our parable, we have a third group presented aside from the lost sheep and the lost coin. The 99 sheep and the 9 coins. What about these ones that aren't lost? Maybe you already noticed the odd language that Jesus uses in **verse 7**.

I hope that your theology antenna went up there. Who could possibly be called righteous, with no need for repentance? Paul says in Romans **3:10** that none are righteous, no one does good and in Romans 3:23 that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

Or what about **1 John 1:8**, when the Holy Spirit tells us through the apostle John, "if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." Are Paul and John contradicting Jesus?

Or what if Jesus is using intentional irony here to further drive the point home to his audience? The 99 righteous don't exist. The clear and consistent testimony of Luke's gospel so far has been the universal need for repentance and this text is no different.

So why does Jesus say it at all? Because the pharisees truly believe they are the 99. Their self-righteous perception is that they have perfectly kept the law, they have distanced themselves from what is unclean, what could they possibly have to repent for? So Jesus gets down on their level and speaks to them in a way they should understand. "All of heaven celebrates when these sinners repent, but there is no celebration over your self-righteous religion."

He was telling the pharisees that day, "no matter how much bacon you don't eat, no matter how much you disassociate yourself from what and whom you perceive to be unclean, no matter how long and lofty your public prayers are, no matter how strictly you keep the law, there is no joy in heaven over a self-righteous rule follower. God does not delight in the proud who *think* they don't need to repent." He was calling the pharisees to repent.

And Jesus calls us to repent today. No matter how good you think you are, no matter how many memory verses you chalked up in your childhood, no matter how often you're in the church building, no matter what curse words you don't use, no matter how removed from the world you are... there is no joy in heaven over a self-righteous rule follower who *thinks* they don't need to repent. God does not delight in our proud sense of superiority over others. He is calling you and I to repent.

So before we move on, I want to point out that God is not somehow more prone to love blatant, worldly sinners than religious ones. Despite the fact that the call to repentance in these parables is issued to the pharisees, the sinners and tax collectors aren't let off the hook nor is their sin downplayed.

Notice that Jesus doesn't say to the pharisees, "God hates your pride more than he hates the extortion and abuse of the tax collectors, what they're doing isn't so bad." No, he says that heaven celebrates these sinners REPENTING! Both the sinners and tax collectors as well as the pharisees are lost and bound for an eternity apart from God in Hell. Both groups are called to the same repentance and faith in Christ!

I wonder which of these groups you most identify with? The outcast or the self-righteous? The sheep and the coin who know they're lost or the 99 who think they're good?

I'd like to speak to the kids in the room for a moment. Growing up with parents who love Jesus, is it difficult or easy for you to see your sin? Do you see how hard it is to obey your mom and dad and to love your siblings? Or do you see the kids around you at school or in your neighborhood and think about how bad they are compared to you? Do you know Jesus calls YOU to repent?

Jesus' call to people who know they're bad and to people who think they're good is to – repent! Turn from your sin and believe in the gospel. Maybe you're wondering how you can do any of this! It sounds impossible to walk away from the sin that you love and it sounds impossible to kill the self-righteous pride in your heart. The answer is that you can't! You will never come to God on your own, you will never put that pet sin to death on your own.

We were all dead in our trespasses and sins, we were all wandering in the wilderness, and we were all lost, lying helpless in a dark corner, destined for the wrath of God... But there's good news coming in our second point: **The Agent of Repentance.**

How does what is lost come to be found? How does the sheep get returned to safety and how does the coin get restored to its owner? The order of what happens in both the sheep and the coin is important. The sheep does not cry out for help, the coin does not roll itself to the light, but both are sought out by someone.

The shepherd goes after the one that is lost, until he finds it, refusing to rest until the sheep is restored to the flock. This is a rescue mission. The woman lights a lamp, sweeps the house, gets on her hands and knees and seeks diligently until she finds the coin.

While it may sound passive that Jesus "receives" sinners in verse 1 of our passage today, here we're given an image of an all-consuming hunt. This is anything but passive. This is the active pursuit of the lost until it is found and returned home. The shepherd in our text willingly and joyfully puts himself in harm's way for the sake of the lost. As he goes out into the dangerous wild to find it, see what he does when he comes to his sheep. Does he call it to himself from a distance? Does he lure it in with treats? NO! He goes to the sheep, picks it up and lays it on his shoulders!

I'm not a hunter, but I plan to use two hunting illustrations today because they fit so well with what Jesus is doing here and hopefully it resonates with you outdoorsmen out there. After successfully bringing down a large animal like an elk, some guys call a friend to bring a horse or four wheeler to drag it out on. Not one of our members, Mark Southall. He is way too masculine for that.

Mark quarters these things up and carries them out on his shoulders, like our shepherd. I asked him this week what the furthest he's had to hike with an elk on his back was and it was 3.5 miles. 3.5 miles might not sound like very far to some of you, but consider the burning in your shoulders, the stiffness in your

neck, the fatigue in your legs, as every muscle in your body engages to get that bull out to your truck on your back. Up and down hills and valleys, through brush and mud, constantly aware that at any moment, a mountain lion or grizzly could smell dinner and invite itself over to eat both of you.

Mark said every time he does it, he thinks he's going to see Jesus. I'm assuming he means he could die from exhaustion, you can ask him afterward. But for some reason, he continues to do it. He might tell you something different, but I'm guessing his motivation is joy. Mark loves to hunt. He loves to be in the woods, searching for animals he knows are out there, and he continues to endure the struggle and strain of the trek out of the woods when he's found one... because it brings him joy.

In our passage, the pursuit of the sheep is JOY for the shepherd, even in the difficult, strenuous, and painful journey it would take to bring it home. Look at **Hebrews 12:2**, which says: "...Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."

Here we see Jesus that Jesus is the joyful agent of our repentance. For joy, he endured the agony of the cross to find the lost and bring us home. It was his delight to suffer and die to redeem us sinners. In his resurrection and by the power of His Spirit, he initiates, he draws, he gives life to us... he picks us up and throws us on his shoulders and gives us the appetite to repent and believe. He sustains our faith, he helps us to obey daily, he carries us back to the safety of his fold.

This is why he came. In **John 10:11**, Jesus calls himself our good shepherd. In Luke 19:10, he tells us plainly that the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost. Not to make himself available if we're interested... not to passively sit back and wait for us to come, he knows we won't! He came to seek and save, he is the only way to the repentance that we all desperately need and he is the only way to the peace of being found. But it's still possible to miss the point of what Jesus is doing here in the passage. He wants us to see that repentance is not only necessary but it is the only way to joy.

Which is our third point: **The Joy of Repentance.**

Both parables highlight the significance of the return of the lost item and the joy that follows. There are five references to joy and rejoicing in these 10 verses. So we'll look at three types of joy that come from repentance that are clear or inferred from our passage. First, let's consider the **personal joy** of repentance.

Wherever they came from before, the sheep know no other identity now but belonging to the shepherd. Which means their safety, security, peace, and freedom. Listen to how Jesus speaks of his sheep in **John 10:27-30**.

If being found and returned to the flock necessarily involves repenting, look at what you get in return when you turn from your sin to Christ. You get: the guiding voice of Jesus, our good shepherd. He knows us, we follow him. He gives us eternal life where we will never perish. No one can snatch us from Jesus' sovereign hand. Our Father gave us to Jesus, chose us in him before the foundation of the world, and He is greater than all. No one can touch us in His safe grip. Jesus is one with the Father, therefore, his grip is as tight and as strong as the Father's grip on us.

Because of the cross, we are not only received by Jesus, but the triune God will hold and sustain us, never letting us go.

Listen to how author **Dane Ortlund** puts it:

“We cannot present a reason for Christ to finally close off his heart to his own sheep. No such reason exists. Every human friend has a limit. If we offend enough, if a relationship gets damaged enough, if we betray enough times, we are cast out. The walls go up. With Christ, our sins and weaknesses are the very résumé items that qualify us to approach him. Nothing but coming to him is required—first at conversion and a thousand times thereafter until we are with him upon death.”

It’s possible that even as a believer, you feel like you’ve been left to wander aimlessly, wondering where God is in your trials – and this parable leaves room for what’s normal to the human experience. But if you’re a Christian today, remember that no matter how it feels, you have been found by Jesus and he will carry you on his shoulders until the day you die and see him face to face.

In **Deuteronomy 1:31**, listen to how God’s relationship to his people is described, even in spite of their rebellion and disbelief: “and in the wilderness, where you have seen how the Lord your God carried you, as a man carries his son, all the way that you went until you came to this place.” The only response that makes any sense is to turn to him again in repentance and faith, trusting him in the midst of whatever you’re going through.

Next, let’s look at the **communal joy** of repentance. This idea might be harder for us to grasp as individualistic Montanans. But in Middle Eastern culture, there is a lot of shared life and responsibility within the community. Nothing happened in isolation, most of the little activities of day to day life affected the whole community. It would’ve been rare for an individual or family in this context to own a flock of 100 sheep.

More than likely, the flock that Jesus describes in his parable would consist of sheep belonging to multiple families or individuals. Therefore, there would’ve been a shared responsibility for the collective 100 sheep among multiple shepherds, each owner invested in the care of the whole group. When one goes missing, the responsible party might bear the unique burden of tracking it down. However, the whole community would feel the loss. The whole community would be concerned for the well-being of not just the sheep but even the shepherd.

So they stand in the road, almost holding their breath, watching and waiting for their friend and neighbor to return home with his lost sheep. Imagine their joy when on the horizon, they make out the blurry outline of the shepherd, slowly trudging along, not by himself but with his sheep in tow. Then the shepherd calls for a block party. He doesn’t care how exhausted he is, his work is finished and it’s time to celebrate! Rejoice with me, he calls out!

We don’t have time to address the coin in detail, but this coin Jesus refers to is a Greek drachma, worth approximately a day’s wage. If the woman only had 10 of them, we’re talking about a person whose entire investment portfolio doesn’t get her very far into retirement. Again, when there’s a sense of interdependence among friends and neighbors in a community, when an individual loses something valuable, it is a loss to the whole village. Upon discovering the coin, she calls for a block party! She doesn’t care that it’s probably late since it’s dark out, the coin has been found! Rejoice with me, she calls out!

In the same way, we ought to rejoice in our salvation, together. Nothing in our life occurs in a vacuum. Both our sin and our salvation affect those around us! We aren't just saved from our sins, but we're saved into God's family in the church! He has purchased a people for his own possession, not just individual persons. When was the last time you had someone over and asked them how they came to know Christ? Did you rejoice together over the fact that you were both once lost but have been found in Christ?

A few years ago, with no prior introduction, I met Matt Calderone, one of our members on YouTube. I hope you've had the privilege of seeing the video I'm talking about. He had just taken down a big bull elk during archery season while out hunting with his brother.

As they recount the story, he and his brother kept praising God for bringing them not only the elk but the opportunity to share the gospel with some other hunters while they were out that weekend. Their joy is evident as they laugh and shout and smile all the way through. Even without knowing who this guy was, I felt a shared sense of joy with Matt. If we can experience that kind of joy over a dead elk, shouldn't we rejoice all the more at a dead sinner brought to life in the gospel?

What was your experience with the last baptism that took place at Sovereign Hope? The reason we do baptism the way that we do is so that the whole church might witness the public outworking of the gospel in someone's life, seeing and celebrating Jesus' saving power first-hand, rejoicing together at the lost being found! So last time we baptized a brother or sister in Christ, did you celebrate God's amazing work of bringing another repentant sinner home into his family? Or did it leave you unphased? I pray that Sovereign Hope Church is known as a people who regularly celebrate God's work in each other's lives.

There is one last type of joy associated with repentance in this passage and that is **Heavenly joy** over repentance.

In **verse 7** of our passage we see the following: "Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." And again in verse 10, "Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Jesus tells us something extremely profound: All of heaven celebrates when sinners repent. The triune God and all his angels take joy in our salvation. Have you ever considered the implications of that? Even after believing the gospel, we can continue to view ourselves like God just tolerates us because he is somehow obligated, because this is how we would treat our enemies if we forgave them.

Listen to **Dane Ortlund** again. He says:

"[The] high and holy Christ does not cringe at reaching out and touching dirty sinners and numbed sufferers. Such embrace is precisely what he loves to do. He cannot bear to hold back. We naturally think of Jesus touching us the way a little boy reaches out to touch a slug for the first time—face screwed up, cautiously extending an arm, giving a yelp of disgust upon contact, and instantly withdrawing. . . . This is why we need a Bible. Our natural intuition can only give us a God like us."

Here in Luke 15, the word of God, spoken by the incarnate son of God, makes clear for us today that heaven celebrates every single person who repents and believes in the gospel! Look at where else we see heavenly celebrating in scripture to get a pulse on what causes heaven to erupt in worship:

In **Luke 2:13-14**, the infamous Christmas passage, a multitude of angels shows up over the field of shepherds, praising God, saying “glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” Or check out **Revelation 5:11-13**.

The same angels that sang and shouted at the birth of the good shepherd, the same angels who thunderously praise Jesus for his worthiness because of his death in our place, those same angels take joy in *your* repentance. Jesus gets the glory, because he drew you, he wooed you, he carried you on his shoulders and he led you to repent. There is singing and shouting and rejoicing in heaven over our repentance, not because we’re worthy, but because of the worthiness of the one who makes our repentance possible!

I want to close with a few points of application. First, and most obvious, is to repent. Have you considered yourself part of the 99 without acknowledging your need? Or have you viewed yourself as a sinner and tax collector who is too far gone?

Jesus says in **John 6:37**, “all that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out.” The call to repentance and the joy that follows is to everyone, so if you’re with us and you’ve never turned from your sin and trusted Christ, I’m begging you to come to Jesus today.

If you’re here and you’ve been a believer for a long time, maybe you’re a member here, the call is still to repent. Repentance and faith aren’t just the doorway to the Christian life, they are the whole house. We continue to repent and believe every day, and we’re actually going to practice the first step in repentance when we confess our sins together in a moment.

Secondly, if you’re a Christian here this morning, having been found by our shepherd Jesus, shouldn’t this passage motivate us to seek the lost in our lives? Do we get down on our hands and knees with the flashlight of the gospel, do we leave the security and safety of our community groups to go after our non-christian friends and family members to bring them the good news?

First, with your lost friends, family, and coworkers, who are sick and dying in their sin, have you ever considered that you might be the only person in their life who has the cure? When I share the gospel, you wouldn’t believe the number of people who grew up adjacent to a church or people who know Christians but say something like, “wow, I had no idea this is what the Bible taught.” If you are unsure where to start with evangelism, come talk to me or one of the elders or someone you know who shares the gospel. We’d love to help you think through how to approach those conversations.

Finally, **Habakkuk 2:14** tells us that “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.” And yet, today, there are over 3 billion people living in places where they have basically no knowledge of the glory of the Lord. These 3 billion people will never experience the joy of repentance unless someone gives up the comfort and security of home and home to seek them out like Jesus sought all of us out. Have you ever considered if God might have you uproot your life to go?

I pray that God would break our hearts this morning for the lost in our lives and across the globe and that we would be a church that has so thoroughly experienced the joy of being found in repentance that we could not help but go and tell others they can have the same joy!