

WHAT IS YOUR ATTITUDE TOWARDS REPENTANT SINNERS?

SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST

By Ron Ritchie

On a Thursday afternoon in March of 1971, John Fischer, a friend of our family and an intern who had been ministering with our staff in Peninsula Bible Church's high school department, dropped by our home in Sunnyvale. He told Anne Marie and me that he had just talked to a mutual friend who worked in our ministry before he moved to Phoenix, Arizona, where he became involved in another ministry. John told us that our friend was spiritually depressed and discouraged and that he felt angry and isolated. He was working in a ministry that relied on religious flesh, he said, and he felt a deep need to be discipled—a need that was not being met. As we sat in the livingroom that afternoon we felt helpless. We wanted to be with our friend, to encourage him and bring him back to be with us, but we didn't know how to go about it. As we continued to talk, however, I believe it was John who said, "Why don't we telephone him to encourage him and find out indirectly if he will be at his home this weekend? Then if he is, let's drive all night to Phoenix and surprise him with a personal visit." We all agreed that it was a great plan, so while we called him, my wife prepared food for the long journey. We prayed together, then Anne Marie hugged us and watched us drive away in John's ragtop 850 Fiat Spider to begin our all-night-and extremely cold-drive to Arizona.

We arrived at our friend's apartment around noon the next day and sat on his doorstep until he came home for lunch. How happy he was when he saw us sitting there! He greeted us and hugged us, and then we went to lunch together. We spent a couple of hours listening to him express his feelings of emptiness, and in time, we invited him to leave Phoenix and come home with us to become an intern at PBC. He said he would think about it and let us know his decision in a few days. We stayed with him that night and left the next morning, thrilled that God had used us as shepherds sent to bring home a lost sheep. A week later, Dick Patterson called us and accepted our offer. About a month or so later, he came to join us at PBC, where he remained to minister among us for 19 years. He recently finished his seminary education, and now he and his wife Jan and four sons are trusting the Lord for their next spiritual adventure.

Most of us have friends who are in some sort of spiritual trouble. They are either struggling with God directly or struggling with some sin that is holding them captive. What should our attitude be towards them during their spiritual struggle, and what should our attitude be towards them once they repent of their sin and return to a vital relationship with our Lord? In the passage to which we come today in our studies in the gospel of Luke, Jesus will clearly show us how we should respond to these two questions.

First, let's look at the setting. Luke 15:1.2:

Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him, and both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

In this context, Jesus and his disciples were passing through Perea on their way towards Jerusalem for the Passover Feast, held each spring to celebrate the redemption of the Jews from Egypt 1500 years earlier. But the Jews of Jesus' time did not realize that "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" was heading towards the cross of Calvary in order to offer redemption to both Jews and Gentiles. At the same time our Lord was seeking genuine disciples who would follow him with hearts willing to forsake all that was important in this life in order to carry his message of the good news to the nations of the world. As we come to our study in Luke 15 today, we will find what many students of the word of God call "The Gospel of the Gospel." Here we will discover the very heart of God the Father expressed through his Son Jesus. We will also see the good news—that God loves the world of fallen humanity so much that he is willing to seek lost sinners whoever and wherever they are.

Now there were two groups listening to Jesus---first, the sinners. Once again, with the heart of a shepherd and an evangelist, Jesus found himself surrounded by men and women of every walk of life: the hated tax-gatherers who were considered traitors to their race, as well as sinners of every kind, those who were considered the "People of the Land." According to William Barclay, some of the Pharisees taught the faithful Jews that "when a man is one of the People of the Land, entrust no money to him, take no testimony from him, trust him with no secrets, do not appoint him guardian of an orphan, do not make him the custodian of charitable funds, and do not accompany him on a journey." Sinners came to listen to our Lord's message of hope. They knew how Christ felt about their sin, but they were coming to him hoping that he could do something about their sinful hearts. And this is exactly why our Lord came to this world. He told the crowds on several occasions: "I have not come to call righteous men, but sinners to repentance" (5:32); and "for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which is lost" (19:10).

Second, in this crowd there were also the ever-present Pharisees and scribes. They were grumbling, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them" (See Luke 5:27-29 and 14:12-14.) They were saying that Jesus could not possibly be the Son of God because many of them believed "there is joy before God when those who provoke Him perish from the world." According to their theology, to eat with a sinner was to agree with his or her immoral lifestyle. They thought it wrong that these sinners, men and women who had probably broken all the Ten Commandments as well as the traditions of Judaism, should be so welcomed by Jesus and that he would offer them the hope of the forgiveness of sin. To them it seemed too simple a solution in light of the fact that most of them had spent their entire lives seeking to live up to the requirements of the Law and its traditions. I had a small taste of how they felt when, as an unbeliever, I watched my dying father, a man who had caused so much pain in our family, accept Jesus on his deathbed. It seemed unfair to me. If I were the judge of the world at that time in my life, I would have sent him directly to hell.

In order to teach the Pharisees the heart of his Father towards sinners who repent, Jesus now turns their attention to three parables: the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. Each of these stories was designed to encourage them to listen objectively, with the hope that many of them would in time discern that he was really addressing them as sinners who needed to come to terms with their own sin and repent of it. If they would repent of their own personal sin, as well as their sin of rejecting Jesus as their long-promised Messiah, there would be great rejoicing in heaven. Lest we be tempted to be too harsh on the Pharisees, however, we need to check out our own heart attitude towards those known sinners around us who have repented of their sin and now have been forgiven by God. Let us see if we have a resentful spirit towards them because through the years we have sought to live lives that we thought were pleasing to God. Thus, Luke places us in a position where we have to ask ourselves, What is our attitude towards repentant sinners?

I. We should rejoice that a lost sheep was found Luke15: 1-7

And He told them this parable, saying, "What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture, and go after the one which is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!' I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."

(a) Parable time: The lost sheep. The Jewish nation knew that Jehovah was their Shepherd of Psalm 23, just as Christians know that Jesus is the Good Shepherd of John 10. Perhaps Jesus saw a flock of sheep grazing on a nearby hill, and once the crowd sat down, he got their attention by pointing to the flock for the context of his parable (which is a story with moral and physical overtones taken out of their familiar surroundings). "What man among you," asks Jesus, "who has a flock of sheep and when the time comes to bed them down, does not begin his nightly ritual of counting them?" At the end of the evening count, this shepherd discovered that one of his sheep had gone astray and was missing. The one sheep was so valuable that he left the rest of his flock in the care of his fellow-shepherds and set out, determined to search all night if necessary until he found the sheep. Then, once he had found it, he picked it up, placed it on his shoulders and returned, rejoicing with his fellow-shepherds and friends, saying, "I have found my sheep which was

lost."

(b) The parable explained. At this point our Lord turned to the grumbling Pharisees and scribes, many of whom thought that rejection of sinners would cause the sinners to repent of their sin. In this story, however, Jesus illustrated that his loving and compassionate Heavenly Father had the opposite view: he was willing to go out and search for a lost sheep. Barclay comments: "A great Jewish scholar has admitted that this is the one absolutely new thing which Jesus taught men about God-that He actually searched for men." In this context, some of the Pharisees thought they were the righteous ones, but the Lord was trying to show them that they too were sinners. As the time of his crucifixion drew near, Jesus was seeking to demonstrate that he was the Good Shepherd who sought for any and all lost sheep within Israel, no matter who they were, no matter what class of people they came from, and no matter the personal cost, even to the point of laying down his life for them. Why? Because they were more valuable to God in heaven than any little lamb on earth.

To share the principle which he had in mind, Jesus then, as it were, drew back the curtains of heaven and declared, "...there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 [self] righteous persons who [think they need] no repentance." This is how valuable men and women are to the Father. All of heaven stops and rejoices over one sinner who repents.

About six years ago, I had the privilege of introducing a young woman to Jesus. Once she accepted him as her personal Lord and Savior, she became involved in a Bible study with several other Christian women of her age and seemed to be growing spiritually. Anne Marie and I became friends of her family, who later became Christians, and in time we held a Bible study in her home for about a year and a half, thus allowing us to keep in touch with her on almost a weekly basis. Four years ago, she met and fell in love with a young man who was not a Christian. Despite the love and concern of her family and friends, as well as the clear teaching of the scriptures against mixed marriages, she married this man. This created a lot of misunderstanding between her and her Christian friends who loved her enough to share the truth of the scriptures with her. She became angry and drifted away to a new set of friends who agreed with her decision to marry an unbeliever. I have not heard from her in four years, but there have been many times when I have thought of her gentle spirit and warm smile. After the first service last week, a woman who knew about our past friendship told me that this woman and her husband had moved into her apartment complex, and she wondered if I would like to have her address. I was thrilled to hear she was back in the area. Last Wednesday, with a trembling hand and a hopeful heart, I wrote her a note inviting her to have lunch with me sometime very soon. Would you pray with me that we can meet and that she may have a heart towards repentance, so that all of heaven can rejoice that this "lost lamb" of God's has been found?

What should be our attitude towards repentant sinners? We should find our hearts rejoicing when a lost lamb is found and returned to the flock of God, and:

II. We should rejoice that a lost coin was found Luke 15: 8-10

"Or what woman, if she has ten silver coins and loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost!' In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

(a) Parable time: The lost coin. Our Lord sought to drive home the spiritual reality that his Father had sent him to earth to save that which was lost. His Father's heart is filled with love, mercy and forgiveness towards all who repent of their sin against him-tax-gatherers as well as Pharisees and scribes. In this case, Jesus teaches a parable about a woman who had ten silver coins but had lost one (equal to a full day's wages or the price of one sheep). This money was her security and it was of great value to her, so like the shepherd, she was determined to find that which was lost. She lit a lamp and swept the whole house, and failing to find it by sweeping, she went throughout the house searching for it carefully until she had found it. Once she did find it, her heart was so filled with joy that, like the shepherd, she couldn't contain herself. She called together her friends and neighbors, saying, "Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost."

(b) The parable explained. If a woman can rejoice over the finding of one coin (which bore the image of the Roman Emperor), think how much more valuable is a lost sinner who bears the image of God on his soul and is returned to God! In all the other religions of the world, man is seeking and yearning for God, but in the scriptures, we find God in Christ seeking man to save him for time and eternity. "Because the Saviour has paid with His precious blood for the redemption of man, every soul has an infinite value in God's sight and the way to the throne of grace is open to everyone who desires to enter" (Geldenhuys.) When someone is confused, angry and weak, we ought to spend time with him and bring him back to fellowship.

And here is the principle. Jesus said: "In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." Human beings are the only things of real value in the world. Everything else is going to be burned up, but people are eternal—they are stamped with the image of God.

This past year I have been counseling with a middleaged couple whom you would enjoy knowing. In the beginning of our relationship, I assumed I was dealing with two Christians, but over several conversations, it became apparent that the husband was not a believer in Jesus as Lord. One day last August, he came to see me to ask how he could be the good husband his wife needed. I looked right at him and said: "The first thing you need to do is go home and fall on your knees before God and ask him to forgive your sins. Then invite Jesus Christ into your heart as your Lord and Savior. He will begin to teach you how to become a servant leader within your home, and in time, you will have the joy of becoming one with your wife for the first time in your marriage." I went on vacation in September, and on the day I returned, I received a call from him. He said, "Ron, this is 'Bill'. I couldn't wait to call you because a lot has happened since I saw you. First, I did everything backwards. I went home from our meeting and tried to become the leader of our home. It so frightened my wife that she left me. So then I called up a friend and asked him to help me invite Jesus into my heart. He did, and I wanted to be the first to tell you that I'm now a Christian. Now I want your prayers for the reconciliation of my family." This is now December, and with the help of many loving and caring Christians within this community, that reconciliation is well under way. "In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

What should be our attitude towards a sinner who repents? Are we willing to join with the angels in heaven and rejoice with them over one sinner who repents? We should be rejoicing over the lost sheep and the lost coin that were found, and:

III. We should rejoice that a lost son was found

Luke 15: 11-32

And he went and attached himself to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he was longing to fill his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him. But when he came to his senses, he said, How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men. And he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him, and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him, and kissed him. And the son said to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son. But the father said to his slaves, Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found. And they began to be merry. Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things might be. And he said to him, Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound. But he became angry, and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began entreating him. But he answered and said to his father, Look! For so many years I have been serving you, and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have

never given me a kid, that I might be merry with my friends; but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with harlots, you killed the fattened calf for him. And he said to him, My child, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to be merry and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.

This parable is known to most of us as the parable of the Prodigal Son. In fact, it is so familiar we tend to miss the main point, which should be taken in concert with the other two parables. The Lord is trying to get the Pharisees, and all of us as well, to see how eternally valuable to him and his Father is each sinner who repents, and that we should have the same heart towards sinners. We should have hearts of love, forgiveness and rejoicing over anyone who repents of his or her sin against God. The first two parables tell the Divine side of repentance, but this story illustrates the human side.

(a) Parable time: A man with two sons. It appears that this was a wealthy family, one with few materialistic cares. But one day, the younger man, who dreamed of adventure and freedom from family responsibilities, said to his father: "Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me." During this time in the Jewish culture, a Father could leave his money in his will to be divided up among his children after his death, or he could draw up a living will and give them their share of the estate while he was still alive. So the loving Father "...divided his wealth between them." According to Deut. 21:17, the older son would get two-thirds of the inheritance, but the father could give extra gifts to the younger son as well as his one-third of the inheritance.

(b) The younger son's trip to paradise (13-19). Once he got his share of the estate, this young man lost no time. He packed his belongings and made plans to go to a distant country rather than a place close to home so that he would be far from his family and friends, from his responsibility to hold up the family name, etc. He no sooner arrived at his destination than he began to waste his money on loose living. Then, when he had spent his last shekel, the country he was living in experienced a severe famine. He was in need of a job and, as a Jew, found a job feeding a flock of ceremonially unclean pigs (Lev. 11:7). As he worked he became so hungry that he finally began to eat the seed pods that the swine were given to eat.

(c) Paradise lost. The son finally came to his senses. He realized that at the very moment he was weakening due to lack of food, his father's servants had more than enough bread each day for their physical needs. So he made a plan. He would go to his father and say to him: "Father, I have sinned against heaven (by breaking the fifth Commandment) and in your sight (by spending the money that could have helped his father in his old age). I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired hands." This is a true repentant heart. This son realized that he had sinned against God, as well as his own father, and that sin had consequences. He was willing to accept them if only he could once again come home to be with his father and serve under his authority. So he returned to his father. Here is a symbol of true repentance—a turning away from sin and a turning towards God.

(d) The loving father. When the loving father watched one of his sons leave home, it was a time of joy and sorrow for him: joy that a son was secure enough to think he could make it on his own and sorrow that he would miss his loving presence. Apparently the father had heard about his son's moral and physical bankruptcy. As he worked each day, he found himself looking down the long road which his son had left on, hoping that he would soon return home on that same road. One day he saw his son returning home with nothing but the clothes on his back. Rather than wait for him to appear humbly before him, the father couldn't contain himself. With a heart of compassion he ran toward his son and embraced him and kissed him again and again as a sign of forgiveness. The son reacted by saying exactly what he had planned to say, with no strings attached: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father would have nothing to do with turning his son into a servant. This was his long-lost son returning home. It was a time for a feast, a time for rejoicing and celebration. He got the best robe and put it on his son as a symbol of honor; he put a signet ring on his finger to symbolize that he would be a deputy of his father; he put sandals on his feet, symbolizing sonship in contrast to the barefooted servants; and finally, he killed the fattened calf so that all could eat and be merry. What was the reason for the party? "For this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again, he was lost and has been found."

(e) The jealous older brother. The older brother was out in the field and missed all of this. Having finished his day's work, he returned to the house and saw his father, his selfish brother and the servants making

merry. On hearing the reason for the celebration, he became angry and would not join the party or greet his brother. The father was told of his response, and he went out and attempted to reason and encourage him with the same tender love he had expressed towards the younger brother. He encouraged him to come in and join the party and welcome his lost brother back home. But the older son's heart was filled with jealousy, anger, spitefulness, self-pity and pride. He said, in essence, that his faithfulness and obedience never caused his father to give him a party, yet when this worthless son, who had spent all his money on wine, women and song, returned with only the clothes on his back, the father killed a calf and had a party. "It just isn't fair, Dad," said the older brother, in effect.

(f) The parable explained (31-32). The father represents our Heavenly Father. He has great love for sinners outside the spiritual community of Israel, as symbolized by the younger son, and sinners within the spiritual community of Israel, as symbolized by the older son. As Jesus tells this parable we can see that the love of God the Father is being expressed by the Son of God towards both groups of sinners. The tax-gatherers knew they had sinned against God; they recognized their unrighteousness before him. But the Pharisees regarded their relationship with God the Father as that of faithful servants doing their duty, and this caused their hearts to swell into self-righteousness. Theirs was a relationship that was filled with loveless activity for their Heavenly Father. This self-righteous attitude filled their eyes and hearts with jealousy, anger and self-pity when they heard of the return of the younger son who had wasted his life and his wealth. But the Father, with the same heart of love that he had for the younger son, went out and encouraged the older son to join the party.

Here is the principle: after hearing his son's angry response, the father gently reminded him of a basic physical and spiritual reality---"My child, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to be merry and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found."

We have been inundated this weekend with stories about the War in the Pacific on this, the 50th anniversary of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. In an article in the San Francisco Chronicle last week, Howard Kleinberg wrote:

The man who led that attack, Commander Mitsuo Fuchida, signaled the attack to begin at 7:49 a.m., December 7, 1941. Five minutes later, Fuchida's excited code words were heard on the Japanese flagship loudspeaker: "Tora! Tora! Tora!" Complete surprise had been achieved. Much of this story has been told in books and through documents and recorded interviews with key participants. But for Fuchida, Pearl Harbor was only the start of what turned out to be a remarkable odyssey that led from his moment in infamy to the pulpit....After the war, Fuchida read a pamphlet written by Jacob Deshazer, an American bombardier who had participated in Jimmy Doolittle's raid on Tokyo in 1942, been shot down, captured and tortured by the Japanese. Deshazer, said Fuchida, returned to Japan as a Free Methodist missionary and his pamphlet on his days as a prisoner of the Japanese inspired Fuchida, a Buddhist, to purchase a Bible. He read it and not only converted to Christianity in 1950 but became a minister. Fuchida lectured extensively as an evangelical missionary in Japan and to Japanese Americans in San Francisco, Seattle and Los Angeles. On May 30, 1976, the odyssey of Mitsuo Fuchida came to a natural end in Tokyo at the age of 75. The man who sent the message "Tora! Tora! Tora!" was at last at peace with himself.

Are we ready to forgive as this man was forgiven? I know it doesn't seem fair at times, but God is always ready to open his arms in forgiveness to sinners who wish to repent. During this holiday season, many of us will have an opportunity to see family members, old friends and neighbors. Some of these relationships may tempt us to become tense, angry and bitter as we come face to face with ex-husbands and wives and with ex-in-laws who believe we are at fault, although that may not be true. We may see mothers or fathers with their new mates; we may have new step-sisters or step-brothers. We live in a fallen world, and the holiday season only helps remind us of this fact, especially if we come from a broken family. We are going to cross paths with sinners and former sinners, but we who have been forgiven much can love much. We can become part of God's plan of love and redemption by allowing him to empower us by the indwelling Holy Spirit to:

- (1) become the shepherd who went out and found the one lost lamb, and rejoiced;
- (2) become the woman who searched and found the one lost coin, and rejoiced;

(3) become the faithful father who waited for the one lost son with a heart of love and forgiveness, and rejoiced.

And keep in mind our Heavenly Father's evaluation of events on earth will help motivate us to become more and more like Jesus this holiday season:

(1) "...there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."

(2) "...there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

(3) "My child, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to be merry and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found."

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