SM045 Lost!

Jesus had made it very plain to all who were listening and watching. He had come to offer the kingdom of God to everyone. The rich thought it was surely for them. They thought they were the favored ones of God because they had been blessed with wealth. But Jesus taught that the kingdom of God was an invitation to the poor.

Those who spent their time studying the details of religious tradition thought the kingdom of God was for them. They thought they were the favored ones of God because they had so much religious knowledge. But Jesus taught that the kingdom of God was an invitation to those who had broken the religious traditions and even the laws of God. God was forgiving them and providing a fresh start.

Those who had high honor in society thought the kingdom of God was for them, but Jesus taught that the kingdom of God had come with an invitation to the lowly and to the despised, that God cared for them too and that he wanted to exalt them and give them a place at his table.

A place at his table – this is what Jesus was offering to everyone – to the poor as well as the rich if they would humble themselves, to the law-breakers and to the law-keepers if they would all humble themselves, to the lowly, despised, sick, and maimed as well as those who were highly esteemed, provided that they would all humble themselves and acknowledge the goodness and mercy and grace of God. There was room for all at God's table and so on one day Jesus might have a meal with religious leaders and speak to them about God's kingdom and on another day he might have a meal with notorious sinners and speak to them about God's kingdom. All needed forgiveness and Jesus came to offer the great banquet of God to all.

After all, this is what the prophets had said, that God himself would host a great banquet for all the people of the earth. God would wipe away tears. God would dispel the darkness from men's hearts. God would swallow up death and people would enter into the life of the ages with him. And Jesus was fulfilling the prophecies of old when he would dine with people and offer them the forgiveness of the kingdom.

But this is what got Jesus into so much trouble. He had been in trouble for healing on the Sabbath. He had done this many times. Rather than everyone rejoicing at God's goodness to bless his people on their day of rest, the religious leaders were infuriated at what they thought was a violation of the laws of God. Jesus also got into trouble for the kinds of people he spent time with – the sinners.

This is what the ancient story-teller, Luke, says:

> Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach. [2] This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that he was associating with such sinful people—even eating with them!

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To be invited to a meal in the ancient world, as it is in many parts of our world today is a high honor. To be invited to a meal meant that the host was saying, "I want peace with you. I want a relationship of trust with you. I want to be a brother to you." To invite one's peers, one's associates was natural – a brotherhood and peace already existed. But to invite those who were of lower rank was taking a risk. Could these people be trusted? Yet, Jesus did it frequently and when he would do this he would pronounce forgiveness upon those who came with a humble heart.

Jesus offered forgiveness to tax collectors. The tax collectors collected money on all goods entering or leaving their district or upon goods being transported across the district. They would set up their custom houses or tax collecting booths at gates, bridges, or landings by the large bodies of water. It seemed one could not move without the sharp eyes of tax collectors upon them.

Tax collecting was a risky business in the ancient world. The Romans required such men to pay the taxes up front and then they would be released to go into a district to collect the taxes from the people. Such a system would invite abuse and harshness in receiving the taxes from the people and some tax collectors would barely be able to make a living, especially the ones who were honest. But some tax collectors were wealthy and because of their wealth the people would suspect dishonesty and would despise them.

Could people like this be forgiven? "Yes," Jesus said, and he had proved it already by inviting Matthew to be one of his closest followers. He had challenged Matthew, the tax collector to follow him, and Matthew had done just that. Matthew even hosted a great banquet for Jesus, a banquet with his friends who were despised by the religious people of the day, and Jesus gladly came to this banquet and spoke his words of grace and love to them.

Jesus offered forgiveness to notorious sinners – even prostitutes – and he welcomed many who came with tears of joy at being released from the evil things that had held them in chains.

But some people just would not, just could not understand why Jesus was eating with them. It is not that they were angry that these despised people were eating. They had to eat. In the ancient world a noble person would show others how noble and generous he was by feeding the poor. But a noble man did not eat with them. He fed them. But he did not sit at table with them for that would be beneath him. But Jesus did more than feed them. He actually ate with sinners, and he seemed to enjoy it. There was no loathing, no revulsion, no separation in order to keep oneself pure. He welcomed and accepted them.

But Jesus did something even more than eating with such sinners and this infuriated the religious leaders. Jesus, himself, hosted banquets and invited these people to his meals. In the ancient world, when a man would host a banquet, he would shower compliments upon his guests when they would enter his house. The guests would then return these compliments upon the host, telling him it was an honor to be present, and they would invoke the blessing of God upon the host.

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One day, Jesus was hosting a banquet in a home. Some of the religious leaders were standing by watching when a tax collector came to the door. Jesus said, “Welcome, you who are loved by the Lord. Welcome to this home. Enter in, be full of joy, and know that God is pleased that you have come.”

The tax collector replied, “Jesus, may you be blessed of God for your great mercy. The honor is mine that you would invite me to come and to share this meal with you.”

Then, a woman came to the door, a woman who was known for her sinful behavior and Jesus came to her and said, “Welcome, my sister. I am so glad you have come. Enter in and be full of joy at God’s great mercy to you.” And the woman, with tears in her eyes and a voice that could barely speak because of her great emotion said, “Thank you, my Lord, thank you.”

The religious leaders had seen enough. “I cannot stand this. He not only eats with sinners but he is welcoming them as full members into our community. He is actually hosting them and blessing them. What right does he have to do this. These people are to be despised. They are to be judged. These people are lost!”

And when they said the word lost, Jesus turned his attention to them and said, “Lost, you say? You say these people are lost? Friends, they were lost but now they are found. Let me tell you a story about what it means to be lost and then to be found.”

And when we come back we will hear the stories of the lost lamb and the lost coin.

Interlude

Jesus called out to everyone. “My friends, thank you so much for coming to my feast today. My feast is to honor God and to honor God by honoring you. God has made you in his image and you are special to him. Yes, you have strayed but the Lord has come seeking for you like a shepherd seeking lost sheep and he is overjoyed to have found you and to receive you back into his sheepfold.

“Before we eat today, I want to tell you a story.”

The tax collectors and sinners who were sitting around the table enthusiastically expressed their pleasure. They loved the stories of Jesus because they were more than stories to entertain. Somehow his stories reached into the deepest parts of the hearts of those who listened and changed them.

Jesus then turned to the religious leaders who had been standing and watching the preparation for this meal that Jesus and his disciples had prepared for these sinners. Jesus said, “Will you listen as well?”

And they said, “We are listening.”

There was a shepherd who had charge of 100 sheep. These sheep belonged to several families in a village that were related and they let their sheep graze together. The chief shepherd had other shepherds who would help him watch out for the 100 sheep and every night they would return home on the edge of their village and put their sheep into the pens. This shepherd, and those who helped him,

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loved the sheep. This was their families' wealth. This was their families' honor. This was their families' livelihood. So much depended upon the care of these animals.

One day, as evening was drawing near, the chief shepherd was carefully looking at the sheep and counting them. A look of great concern came over his face. He said, "Where is the little lamb that has just been weaned from its mother. You know the one I am talking about – the one that seems small and not as strong as the others. I don't see it." The other workers began to look with great earnestness at all the flock. They divided them into groups and counted and said, "you are right. We are missing one sheep. It is the little one that has had the most trouble. But what shall we do? It is almost time to take the sheep home."

And the chief shepherd said, "You stay here with these 99. I will go after the lost lamb. If I do not return within an hour, then lead these sheep back to the village." And off the chief shepherd went in search of the little, lost lamb.

He searched through valleys. He searched among the hills. He went to the grazing areas where they had been in recent days thinking that the lamb may have wandered back to them. But he could not find the lamb. The hour had passed, darkness was coming upon the land, and it was not just the little lamb that was in danger, if it even still lived, but the shepherd himself was in danger. Predators would start coming out, hungry predators, sometimes in packs and they would be looking for fresh meat of any kind.

The other shepherds had now returned home. They had done as the chief shepherd had said. They watched the flock in the wilderness for an hour but as darkness approached they knew they had to return to the village. And when they did they called out to their friends and family members. "Everyone listen, one of our lambs has been lost. We only noticed it late this afternoon and our chief shepherd has gone looking for it."

"Why has he done that," a bystander said. "Doesn't he know he could get killed looking for that lamb. It's just one stupid lamb that wandered off and it probably deserves to die. In fact, I bet it's dead already."

"Do not say that. The chief shepherd loves his flock. He knows all of them by name. He cares for them all. It is not his will that even one of these little ones perish at the hands of wild beasts. We must pray for his safety and for the safety of the lamb."

And as news spread in the village, great concern came over these families for the lost lamb and for shepherd who loved it.

Back in the wilderness, the chief shepherd began to be greatly concerned. "What shall I do?" the shepherd thought. My life is in danger now but if I return home without the lamb there will be great sorrow. And the lamb may still be alive. Lord, help me. Lord give me strength." And the shepherd continued to search and stumble through the rough terrain as the sun continued to set.

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Finally, he heard it. A small bleating, a small sound coming from a brushy area off to his right, but the shepherd heard another sound as well. It was the sound of predators and they were snarling and moving in the same direction as the lamb. The shepherd could just make out the shape of two jackals heading toward the brush and the bleating of the lamb grew louder with fear.

Then with a great voice the shepherd cried out, “I’m coming! I’m coming!” and ran toward the brush, his staff raised over his head. The jackals turned their attention to him and attacked but they were no match for the rage of the shepherd and his staff that came crashing down upon their backs. They yelped loudly at the pain that shot through their bodies as the blows rained down upon them like a sudden thunderstorm in the wilderness and they ran for their lives. The shepherd, exhausted, and bleeding from his hands and feet knelt down into the brush and there was the little lamb. With tears of joy he scooped the lamb into his arms and said, “Thank you, Lord, thank you for giving me strength. Thank you for helping me to find our lamb. Direct me now to our home.”

And with great joy the shepherd laid the little lamb upon his shoulders and painfully made his way back through the wilderness toward the village.

In the village, the other shepherds had safely put the 99 into their pens. Their family members had already prepared their meals and eaten and were now getting their children into the beds, but they all continued to worry and to pray. Then, they heard a voice, a voice calling from just outside the village.

“I am home. I have returned. All of you – get up. All of you, come out. I have found our lost lamb. God was with me. God protected me. Let us rejoice together!” And the families, overjoyed at this wonderful news came out and celebrated with the chief shepherd. They surrounded him and tended to his hands and feet. The other shepherds picked up the little lamb and hugged it. They returned it to the sheepfold with the 99 who had not been lost. And they all went into their homes and with gladness of heart rested for the goodness of God.”

The story was over. Jesus looked at the Pharisees. Then he looked at the tax collectors and sinners that he had invited. The meal was now ready and Jesus moved toward the table and reclined. He then turned back toward the Pharisees and said, “I am here tonight with my sheep. They were lost, but now they are found. I am rejoicing that God has given me strength to find them. They are precious to me. They are valuable to me and I tell you that there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 who need no repentance.”

Jesus then invited his friends to recline with him and when they did he said, “Barukh atah Adonai Eloheinu melekh ha'olam, ha'motzi lehem min ha-aretz. "Blessed are You, LORD, our God, King of the universe, Who brings forth bread from the earth."

And they began to eat and rejoice with Jesus like lambs grazing before the loving eyes of a shepherd who would lay down his life for the sheep.

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In a few moments, one of the women said, “Jesus, tell us another story.” Jesus looked back at the religious leaders who were standing along the walls watching Jesus eat with these sinners. He said, “Would all of you like to hear another story?”

“Whatever you wish, Jesus,” they said, with mock sincerity.

Jesus began, “There was … a woman,” Jesus looked back at the Pharisees for their reaction. He had told a story already about lowly shepherds who were looked down upon and the shepherd turned out to be the hero of the story. Now he was telling a story about a woman! How low would Jesus go, the infuriated keepers of tradition thought.

“There was a woman,” Jesus said, “who lived in a small, poor village. The people in this village grew their own food, they made their own cloth. No one was rich. Few people had money and those who did carefully guarded it, lest it be lost or stolen.”

“In this village was a woman who had ten coins. She treasured her money and like many she made a beautiful necklace of it. In this way, she could adorn herself and she could also keep the precious coins close to her at all times. One morning, as she awakened and dressed she went to her necklace of coins and she gasped – one of the coins was gone. This was one-tenth of her private wealth. It meant so much to her and the beauty of her necklace was diminished by the missing piece.

The woman went to her friends and said, “What will I do? What will my husband say when he sees the missing piece. He may think that I spent it frivolously at the market, or he will be upset that I have lost it.”

One of the village women said, “Here is what you must do. You must return home. You must light every lamp in the house. You must sweep in every corner and you must look in every place until you find your coin. And above all you must pray.”

So the woman went home and did as her friends suggested. She lit several lamps in the house so that every part of her home was brightly lit, and then she started sweeping. She swept slowly and she peered diligently into every corner and every crack. She brought her lamps close to shine on every part of her abode. She worked oh so carefully! She did not want to miss any part of her home for fear that she might overlook the valuable coin that also adorned her necklace. For one hour she worked, for two hours she worked, sweeping slowly and carefully, sometimes on her knees as she would look at every part of the floor. Finally, just as she was about to give up she called upon the Lord, “Please Lord, please help me to find this coin. You know that we will need this. Please open my eyes to find that which is lost.” And when she finished her prayer, she swept again, and this time, she heard something scrape along the floor and then a soft tinkling sound like a coin that had been picked up by a broom and then fallen again. The woman reached back for one of the lamps that was near to her, never taking her eyes off the spot from which the sound had come and when she brought the lamp close, she saw something bright and shining in the light. It was her lost coin!

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With great joy she reached out her hand and brought the coin safely to her bosom. Then she ran to her friends and shouted, “I have found it! I have found it! I have found my lost coin! Rejoice with me!”

Jesus finished. He looked at the Pharisees and said, “I tell you the truth. In the same way, there is joy in the presence of God’s angels when even one sinner repents.” And he turned back to his friends at table with him and rejoiced with his new disciples for they once were lost, but now they were found.

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