

Jesus' picture of repentance is being lost to God and then being found by God. The shepherd leaves the ninety-nine in the wilderness and seeks out the one lost sheep. This is the most natural thing in the world to us, this instinct to seek something precious to us that has been lost to us. When mom and dad are sitting outside talking with friends and enjoying the evening, and suddenly someone notices the littlest child is out of sight, and asks, "Where is he?" all other concerns fade away, the conversations you were just having don't matter at all, the only thing that matters is finding this child. He was just with you a minute ago, where is he? Your imagination of what could have happened and your knowledge of just how wicked this world is become magnified to horrific proportions. You drop everything, nothing else matters but finding that child, ensuring that he is okay. All your care and attention are focused on that. And when you find the and embrace him you see again how precious he is, you don't return to the former conversation, the conversation with your friends is now about the child and how he was lost and now is found and how much we love him and how happy we are that he is safe and with us.

The Bible is full of examples of this care and attention for the precious thing that is lost. Jacob loses his son Joseph, he thinks he's dead, his brothers have sold him to slave traders who are taking him down to Egypt, but Jacob thinks he's dead, and Jacob's lost him, and even though he has 11 other sons and he loves them too, still his attention and his care are on the one he lost, and he says that his gray head will go down to the grave in sorrow because he doesn't have his Joseph. King David had many other sons besides Absalom, and Absalom was a bad son, a traitor and a murderer, but David loved him and begged for his life, and when he lost him, when he heard the news of his death, it doesn't matter how many other sons and princes he has, his care, his attention is on Absalom, and he cries out, "**O my son Absalom—my son, my son Absalom—if only I had died in your place! O Absalom my son, my son!**"

God implants in our heart this care and attention for the lost, for the precious and beautiful that has been taken from us, and He does it so that we can have some inkling, some tiny understanding of how much He wants sinners back with Him, how much care and attention He gives to making sure it happens, how much He is willing to pay for it to happen, because nothing else in all the universe, in heaven or on earth, nothing is more important to the almighty God than to get back this precious thing He lost. And that is you. The parable of the pearl of great price is often taught to be all about what you need to do, what you must give up and do for God. It's rather about what God has done in His Son to claim us. God Himself drops everything, leaves His own home in heaven, leaves the company of the righteous angels, and subjects Himself to mockery and pain and death to find what He lost, because we are that precious to Him.

The lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son, these are first of all you. It is all mankind, all sinners who were lost to God. We hear from the prophet Isaiah, "**We all like sheep have gone astray.**" You are numbered among that group. You were that lost sheep. There was a time when you were lost to God. A sheep about to be torn apart by a wolf until the shepherd found you. A coin lost in the dark, until the light of the Gospel shone on you. A rebellious son who indulged your selfish desires until the Father embraced you.

And so it is you over whom all the angels rejoiced. It is you over whom God Himself rejoiced. One angel is more powerful than all the kings and politicians and wealthy of all the world. One angel slew 185,000 of Sennacherib's army in one night because Hezekiah prayed for it. And all the angels in heaven, a thousand times ten thousand, they rejoiced when you were brought out of sin and death in your baptism. They rejoiced when you repented and turned from ungodliness to Christ. That is what brings joy in heaven.

God does delight in the good works of His children, He is pleased with what is done from faith. But what makes all heaven rejoice is not when you accomplish all this other stuff in life, but simply when you became a Christian. When your Shepherd found you and brought you into His fold rejoicing. Because this has been God's care, what He directed all His attention to the moment He had lost you, to get you back. And He is so happy to have you.

The rejoicing hasn't stopped. The shepherd calls his friends together, the woman her neighbors, and the party at the father's house hasn't stopped by the end of our Gospel. It's not ephemeral, it's not a one-time thing. Because you are found and that is a present reality.

Being lost is horrible. The word "lost" in the Greek is the same word translated elsewhere as destroyed, ruined. That's an entirely accurate word. The lost son ended up in a pigsty. All the pleasures of the world, all fulfilled, he did it all, and yet nothing but shame and pain and ruin at the end. St. Paul says it, **"But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death."** That's what being lost to God is.

But being found is the opposite of destruction, ruin, and death. The found son shows us how wonderful it is to be a Christian. All because of the Father's love. The father wasn't just sitting in his house hoping his son might come back. No, he left his house. He was at the end of the road, day after day after day, waiting to see if maybe he could catch a glimpse of his son. This was his obsession from the moment he lost him. He never forgot about him. And when his son was still a long way off, he saw him and he ran to embrace him and he forgave him everything and he called him his son and he clothed him with honor and he ordered the feast of rejoicing.

This is what God has done for you. The Father went to work immediately at Adam's fall. He planned your soul's salvation. He promised the Seed of the woman. He sent his prophets. Then His Son left his house in heaven to seek you and win you by His blood. And His Spirit runs after you when you are still a long way off and puts God's name on you and calls you His son and clothes you with Christ's righteousness. And he invites you to rejoice, brings you to a feast of heavenly food.

And this is the second thing the found son shows us. He's part of the party. It isn't just in heaven with the angels and God. It's here on earth. You're living it. This is the Christian life. You are happy when you live it. Let God define happiness, not your sinful heart. It is happiness to remind yourself every day that God has found you and that finding you has made Him, the Creator, rejoice because He loves you so much. It is joyous to repent of the sins that still cling to you and then to know that your Father forgives you for Jesus' sake. It is pure joy to look back at the pain of leaving your Father's house and know it is over, a nightmare of the past, never to be repeated again, because you are safe again with your Father and you eat at His table and you sing His praises and He hears your prayers. Whatever other trials may arise, whatever pains, nothing is more joyous than being one found by God, living life in His house and happy to do it.

It is the mark of Pharisees to be unhappy with repentance, unhappy with the Christian life. The older brother wanted what his younger brother had. "You never gave me a goat so that I could party with my friends," he says to his father. His little brother got to go out and have all the fun with harlots and he, miserable obedient son, had to stay home. Christians can start to think this way, lose the joy of being home with God. As if being a Christian is a chore, something we have to do for God. And this thinking is very evil. All that I have is yours, the Father says to his elder son. What has God held back from you? What happiness has He denied you by making you a Christian, by finding you when you were lost, by keeping

you from indulging in sin? None. Being a Christian is not the sacrifice of joy. It's participation in God's joy, the angels' joy, the joy you were created to enjoy. God robs the devil of happiness, not you, when He rescues you from the sinful life.

God rejoices when sinners repent and so He bids His Christians to be as He is, to rejoice when the sinner repents. The Pharisees did not rejoice when Jesus ate with the tax-collectors and harlots. They grumbled against Him. They concluded He must be like the sinners. A sinner with sinners. And it is true that like is attracted to like. Rich people hang out with rich people; good looking people hang out with good looking people; smart people hang out with smart people; drunks hang out with drunks; fornicators with fornicators. Birds of a feather flock together. Obviously. Everyone knows this.

This is why Christians should normally hang out with other Christians, so you can encourage each other in your Christian life. This is especially important to keep in mind for our children. Besides teaching them the Word of God, raising them in the faith, the next greatest thing a Christian parent needs to do is ensure that our children are not surrounded by the godless, by the wicked, but by others who will build them up in the faith that we have taught them.

But there are equally obvious exceptions to like being with like. The healthy doctor hangs out with the sick patient. The wise teacher instructs the ignorant student. And the holy God comes to poor sinners to take their sins away. This is what brings Him joy; it's what brings us joy; and we want this joy for everyone.

The older brother didn't have this joy for himself and so he didn't have it for his brother. The Pharisees didn't have this joy for themselves, so they didn't have it for the tax-collectors and sinners. And if you find this coldness in your own heart, pray God to remove it for Jesus' sake. Share in God's joy. Jesus has come and found sinners and made them children of God. Join the angels in rejoicing because God has found you. And God will make you joyful when you see Jesus finding more and more and heaven exploding with rejoicing. And there will be no greater joy in your life than to hand this down to your children, to friends, to one another, to live in it and to die in it.

Jesus ends these parables with rejoicing, even in the face of the older son's unhappiness and anger. It's the only answer. You can't force joy, but you can live it. And this is what Jesus does here. The music is playing, people are singing and laughing and rejoicing. And the father pleads with his angry, unhappy son to join. He says, **"Son, you are always with me and all that I have is yours. It's right to be happy, right to make merry, because your brother was dead and now he's alive, he was lost and now he's found."**

Our Father in heaven pleads with us, seeks to remove all coldness from our hearts. He says to you right now "See what you have. You are always with Me. All that I have is yours. Everything. I've held nothing back. You are a son in My house. You have My name, My honor, an inheritance of eternity. My attention is on you. I continue to give to you." So join the feast, join the merriment, join in the rejoicing of God and the angels and all the heavenly host, make it your joy and it will never disappoint, for you too were dead and now are alive, and you too were lost and now are found.