

*Jesus!*  
*“Lost and Found” (Luke 15)*

*Take a first look.*

I. Let me remind you of an older woman who lived in a town in the lower Yakima Valley back in the 1980s. She has doubtless left this life by now. She had moved to Grandview from a state in the south about ten years before I met her. I had gone to her town for a series of meetings as the guest preacher in the local Baptist church. The woman and her husband were hosting their pastor and me for lunch. The woman was contrasting and comparing her time in Washington to her time in the south. I made some innocent comment about her having lived in her town long enough to have met many people. She answered, “There are still a lot of people in the area that I don’t know, and ...” (here her voice rose noticeable and the look on her face changed) “... there are a lot I don’t *care* to know, either.”

At the time, I did not say much. She and her husband were buying my lunch, I reasoned. However, I knew exactly what she meant. She did not care to know the people who lived and worked all through the lower Yakima county and spoke a different heart-language. I thought, “How sad that she would move all the way up here, settle in lower Yakima Valley (for heaven’s sake!) and carry in her heart such prejudices toward people she didn’t even “care to know.”

II. I wonder if she would have liked Jesus’ company? The religious leaders in Jesus’ time lodged a complaint that sounded much like the complaint of this woman. The people who kept crowding around Jesus were the kind of people that they “didn’t care to know.” Why would this otherwise religious fellow hang with such rabble? We are about to find out why, from Luke, chapter 15.

*Take a closer look at Luke 15:1-31.*

**I. THESE LOST AND FOUND STORIES SHOW US THAT HUMANS ARE IN EITHER OF THREE SPIRITUAL CONDITIONS OF LIFE.**

**1. Condition #1: SAFE.** 99 sheep were safe in the sheep pen. Nine coins were safe in the woman’s possession. One son was still safe at home in his father’s house.

There are at least two dangers that Jesus reveals of spiritual safety:

(1) *We may forget that others are not safe and become complacent, uncaring.*

A—Are we aware of those around us in our neighborhoods, in our school classrooms, in our clubs, at the restaurants where we eat, even in our families, who are lost and headed for eternity separated from God unless something changes?

**I—How would we feel about the rescue workers in New York City if on 9/11/2001 they had all stood back and watched while thousands perished in the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center.** What if they had chosen the way of safety rather than the way of sacrifice, if they had saved themselves due to the risk being too great for them to take the chance of trying to get the people out? Would they still be our national heroes like they are today? We all know the answer to this terrible question. They are heroes, both the fallen and the surviving, because they risked all to save people. They gave no thought to their own safety, or if they did give it thought, they didn’t allow that thought to paralyze them into inaction. Nearly 400 of them gave all they had to give to rescue others. They are worthy of our praise as a result.

Unfortunately, the spiritually lost don’t always *appear* all that lost. They may appear simply

disgusting in the lifestyles they have chosen. On the other hand, they may appear quite together and prosperous, such as we might imagine the “tax collectors” looking. They were often rather wealthy, since they had it in their power to name their own wages from the taxes they collected. Everyone suspected them of being dishonest. It would have been difficult for them to prove otherwise, because few would have believed their evidence, if they had any.

It is dangerous to think oneself so safe that you are unwilling to take a risk to help someone who is not. The danger is this: we might forget that the trouble with people is not that they have bad politics, are pro-abortion, or in favor of homosexual rights, or that they make money from the exploitation of men and women through pornography, or that they are merely greedy capitalists. The trouble is, *they are lost and without Christ*, and they are headed for eternal separation from God unless someone intervenes.

(2) *We may become simply conceited—smug and condemning toward those who are outside the church.* This seems to have been the attitude of many of the Pharisees (the strictest members of the Jewish faith) and the teachers of the law (the men who had the most intimate and detailed knowledge of the Bible at the time). These religious elite continued to be put off by the welcoming attitude of Jesus toward these people they “didn’t care to know.” He even *ate* with them!

A—Do we find ourselves looking down on people whose lives are broken by sinful lifestyles and ruined relationships?

**I—Do we share the attitude of the woman I met in the lower Yakima Valley some years ago?**

Do we feel like the elder brother who can’t believe that the Father would welcome back someone like the prodigal son? Throw a party for him!? What a contemptible person he has become! He isn’t even really worth saving. Let him go to hell, if he really wants to.

If such a thought has crossed our minds, it shows us how much we need to return to the grace of God and have our hearts changed to be more like God’s. Remember Romans 5:8 and John 3:16 here!

“But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8, ESV).

“For in this manner God loved the world, so that He gave the only begotten Son, in order that everyone who keeps on believing in Him should not perish but should have eternal life” (John 3:16, FJV).

**2. Condition #2: LOST.** One sheep was not safe in the sheep pen, it was somewhere else and in danger. One valuable coin was not found in the woman’s possession. It was a drachma, worth a full day’s work. It represented 10% of the woman’s purse. One son was lost. He was one of only two that this father had. That son had chosen to cut himself off from his family. His father was waiting and watching for his return.

Note these three aspects of this condition:

(1) *Realizing one is lost may come over a person gradually.* The story of the lost sheep justifies this observation. How does a sheep become lost? Perhaps it began by simply ignoring the shepherd, then it started looking for “greener grass,” and then suddenly the realization hit: I don’t know my way back into the sheepfold!

**I—This is like the little boy who made the news several years ago at Thanksgiving who**

**became lost near Enumclaw, Washington. A little four-year-old boy doesn't usually set out to become lost.** He simply gets interested in one thing and then another and then another, until he realizes that he is hungry or he trips over a root and cries for his mother, and mother is nowhere to be found. Over ninety search and rescue workers were out looking for that little boy, and they finally found him alive. Why did they search so hard? Who needs to ask such a question?!

(2) *One cannot solve his lostness alone.* Here is where the story of the lost coin has application. What can a coin do to "find itself"? Had not the woman placed such a high value on this coin, it would have remained lost. And this is much the case with us spiritually.

A—Were we not valued so highly by the rightful owner of our souls, our Maker and Redeemer, we, too, would remain lost with no one to find us.

**I—Would that four-year-old child ever have "found himself"? I shudder to think what would have happened to him had not that all-out search been launched.** He did not have the skills for survival nor the physical strength nor the proper covering to remain much longer in the woods alone.

People can seem to get by pretty well on the illusion of self-sufficiency, can't they? They make some money, get into a condition where they can buy what they want and need, and they begin to think that they have no real needs. But then death strikes near, or they contract a fatal illness, or just as suddenly as they have risen to the top in their business, there is an abrupt change in the market and what made all that money is no longer salable. It is amazing how fragile our false securities really are. In the face of death, the ground is definitely level; the rich and the poor alike face it equally.

(3) *The first step in being found is admitting one is lost and unable to "find oneself."* This is where the story of the Lost Son comes in. At the crux of the story, this son "came to his senses" (Luke 15:17). See what he said? "How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men" (vv. 17-18, NIV).

A—We must admit that we cannot save ourselves or we cannot be saved.

**I—The Twelve-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous was begun with this as its first premise: "We admitted we were powerless over [alcohol]—that our lives had become unmanageable."** Such an admission takes courage and honesty and humility. It will not often come until the person has gone just about as low as he or she can go. When there is no other place to look but up, this young man said, "I have sinned against heaven." He wasn't ready to look that high until he had sunk so low.

**Perhaps the church *should* be renamed "Sinners Anonymous."** Our first statement in the New Constitution would go something like this: "We admitted we were powerless in the face of sin and death; but for the grace of God in Christ Jesus our lives would still be out of control."

Do you think that Jesus might have been speaking ironically when He said, "than over ninety-nine righteous persons *who do not need to repent*?" (v. 7). I can almost see Him gesturing over the crowd of Pharisees and teachers of the law who were there with those smug looks on their faces and that hatred in their hearts. The irony of this statement almost jumps off the page.

*The only ones that Jesus cannot help are the people who will not admit they need His help. They are truly without hope, until they confess their need of God's grace for themselves.*

3. **Condition #3: HUNTED.** <sup>20</sup> *We do not have a God Who just passively waits for people to return to Him. He actively searches for them.* This is something new for these religious teachers within the Jewish faith of the first century. The Jewish rabbis had accepted the fact that if a person turned to God in repentance, God would accept and forgive them. But here we see something radically different. God doesn't just wait for people to repent; He pursues them.

The shepherd searches diligently until he finds his one lost sheep. He cares that much for each one. The woman sweeps the dirt floors of her house until she finds her one lost and valuable coin. The story of the Lost Son takes this even farther. It is true that the father in the story doesn't go off and search for his son. But you can be sure that He is actively waiting for the Son's return, not passively. Why do I think so? *"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him"* (v. 20, NIV).

A—So it is with each person who has been found by God. God is actively searching for us, and when we allow Him to find us, when we take that one final step, that God will not force us to take but which He longs for us to take, He receives us with compassion, forgiveness, and rejoicing.

I—Philip Yancey, in his book *What's So Amazing About Grace?* recounts how a group of folks in Lebanon responded to this parable the first time they heard it. Here was the setting and the response. "A missionary in Lebanon once read this parable to a group of villagers who lived in a culture very similar to the one Jesus described and who had never heard the story. 'What do you notice?' he asked.

"Two details of the story stood out to the villagers. First, by claiming his inheritance early, the son was saying to his father, 'I wish you were dead!' The villagers could not imagine a patriarch taking such an insult or agreeing to the son's demand. Second, they noticed that the father *ran* to greet his long-lost son. In the Middle East, a man of stature walks with slow and stately dignity; never does he run. In Jesus' story the father runs, and Jesus' audience no doubt gasped at this detail."<sup>1</sup>

This is truly a story that should be called "The Waiting Father" (as German pastor and theologian Helmut Thielicke names it), but it is not about passively and apathetically waiting. God does search for us, and as has been said by many, He is willing to take every step except the last one, the step of repentance and faith.

## II. THESE STORIES OF LOST AND FOUND SHOW THAT WE RESPOND IN ONE OF TWO WAYS TO GOD'S RESCUE OPERATION:

1. **We resent it.** This is surely what the muttering Pharisees and teachers of the law were doing. This is what the elder brother in the story did. He had never left home and disgraced his family. He had never had such a party.

I—**The story of Jonah is a similar story.** Why was it that Jonah said that he was so miserable that he wanted to just sit down and die? It was because God was merciful and gracious and would forgive those no-good people of Nineveh, and Jonah wanted them to be destroyed! Didn't God know how fiercely they had mistreated Israel in the past? Didn't He know how much they were justly hated by "God's" people?

Never forget the line from Paul, in Romans 5:6, "Christ died for the ungodly." This is grace in action, and we will be tempted to resent it at some point.

2. **We rejoice in it.** This is the response of each of the players in these stories, with the exception of the elder brother. The shepherd called his friends together. The woman did the same. The

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* p. 80, his emphasis.

father didn't even let his lost-and-now-found son get his prepared speech out before he called for a celebration. "*I tell you,*" said Jesus, "*that there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents*" (Luke 15:10, NIV).

A—Are our hearts moved to gratitude and worship when we see someone turn to Christ and put his/her faith in Him?

**I—We are in good company!** Who is it, after all, who is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God, anyway, except *God Himself*?

*Take it home (applications).*

I. WHERE DO WE STAND WITH GOD TODAY?

1. Lost?
2. Safe?
3. Hunted?

II. WHAT IS OUR ATTITUDE TOWARD THOSE GOD IS SEEKING TO SAVE?

1. Do we resent God's mercy?
2. Do we rejoice in God's grace?