

Your Friends Matter to God

Forty Days of Friendship, Week 1

Luke 15:1-32

John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, 5 March 2006

A few years back Bill Hybels wrote a book called *Becoming a Contagious Christian*. I'm drawing heavily from it today, and in this series. There's one passage that particularly struck me:

Deep in every true Christian, there is an awareness that we are on this planet for purposes greater than having a career, paying the bills, loving our families and fulfilling our role as upstanding citizens. Even going to church and worshiping God – important as these are – sometimes leave us feeling that something is missing. After all, we'll worship God for eternity in heaven; we don't have to be here to do that.

What is it that's absent in the lives of so many believers who are crying out for fulfilment? What on earth is God asking us to do?

God wants us to become contagious Christians – his agents, who will first catch a glimpse of his love and then urgently and infectiously offer it to all who are willing to consider it. This is his primary plan, the one Jesus modelled so powerfully, to spread God's grace and truth person to person until there's an epidemic of changed lives around the world."

Most of us probably like the idea of having a spiritual impact on others, but we're simply not going to take decisive action unless we first raise our motivation level. And one of the best ways to do that is to get God's perspective on the matter. Take a Bible and turn with me to Luke 15.

Interestingly, this is the only recorded time Jesus ever told three similar parables in a row. Normally he would perceive some misunderstanding in the minds of people and tell a story to clear it up and then move on until he saw the next issue that needed attention. But not this time. This particular day Jesus is so upset by the attitude of the religious leaders towards those who are far from God that he says, in effect, I'm going to clear this up once and for all. I'm going to say it three times – three stories one after the other – to make sure that every one of you understands how God feels about "sinners." Now there are some common threads that run through each of these three stories. Let's tug on them to see what unravels, to see we can learn.

The loss: something of great value was missing

The first is that in each story something of great value was missing, something that really mattered. The missing sheep was very important to the shepherd. In first century Israel, shepherds knew each of their sheep by name, just as we give names to our pets today. A flock might number only 20 sheep. Each one was enormously valuable. In the second story, the lost coin was vital to the woman's survival. A silver coin, a drachma, was equivalent to about a day's wage. It doesn't sound like much, but the economy of a first century peasant village was based on bartering, not cash. Coins were a rare commodity. So these ten coins probably represented this woman's entire savings. Each one was enormously valuable. And, of course, it goes without saying that the wayward son in the third story mattered a great deal to his father. Our little Emma goes to the church kindergarten. Sometimes I get to pick her up. I love it. All the parents gather together to wait for the session to end. As soon as it does, the doors are flung open, and all these little pre-schoolers spill out. They've been away from their parents for maybe two hours, but if you look at the face of any one of those mums and dads, they are shining with love and affection for their little nipper. What Jesus is saying here, three times over, is that every lost person matters to God. Every one of your friends and neighbours, every person you look at tomorrow, matters to God.

The search: what goes missing is important enough to warrant an all-out search

"Okay," you say, "I accept that. People matter to God. But how much?" That leads us to the second common thread in Jesus' three stories: What goes missing is important enough to warrant an all-out search. One sheep wanders off and the shepherd leaves the other ninety-nine sheep in the "open country" – he risks them – in order to go after the one lost sheep, travelling alone into the wilderness for mile after weary mile – risking his own life – "until he finds it" (v 4). A coin goes missing, so the woman lights a lamp, sweeps the entire house, and searches carefully "until she finds it" (v 8). First century Palestinian houses were very dark. They had just one little circular window. The floor was made of beaten earth and dried reeds. To search for a coin on a floor in a house like that was like looking for a needle in a haystack. But the woman perseveres. And in the story of the wayward son, the father exercises restraint because he respects his boys' freedom, but the implication here is that every day he scans the horizon, watching and waiting for that day when his son might come home. He never gives up, never stops looking.

On 11 September, 2001, Lee Ielpi lost his son. Lee is a retired New York City firefighter. His son, Jonathan, was also a firefighter. He was lost when the Twin Towers fell. Heartbroken, Lee made it his personal mission to recover his son's body. Every day, with dozens of others, he dug through the rubble of ground zero. On 11 December, three months after he started, his son was found. And Lee was there to carry him out, to take him home. Because he never gave up. His son was too precious. Every lost son and daughter is precious to God. He wants them home. He's searching for them. And he can't rest until he has them with him. That's why Jesus, who "came to seek and to save the lost," said to his followers, "As the Father has sent me, now I am sending you." Get involved in what God is doing to search out and draw in people who are spiritually lost. Do you want to get involved? Over the next forty days we're going to explore some very practical steps that we can take to become much more effective in sharing God's life-giving message with our friends. But the point of these stories is that these steps take a lot of time and energy. Searching is hard work. It's costly. And it's tempting to ask, "So is it really worth it?" That brings us to the final common thread in these three stories: In each case the retrieval results in rejoicing.

The joy: retrievals result in rejoicing

The shepherd retrieves the sheep and throws a party. The woman, when she finds the coin, also throws a party. And when the father gets his son back home, the son he had almost given up for dead, he throws the biggest party of all. Notice in v 20 that when the father sees his son a long way off he runs to him. In the ancient world that was something a senior man simply would not do in public. It was undignified and shameful. But this man's joy at his son's return is so great that he doesn't care what his neighbours might think. He picks up his robe and runs towards him, throws his arms around him, and calls out, "Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For *this son of mine* was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found" (vv 23-24). In other words, Jesus says, "It is worth it. The search is worth it."

Remember the incredible story last month about Robert Hewitt, brother of All Black Norm Hewitt, who was adrift at sea off the Kapiti Coast for 72 hours. He was given up for dead but was found alive by his old navy diving mates. He was lost but then, against all odds, he was found. Do you remember the images on TV of his family at the press conference, in the presence of journalists and cameramen: they were laughing and weeping with tears of joy. "In the same way," Jesus says, "there will be

more rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (v 10). It just takes *one* lost son or daughter to return home and all heaven erupts in cosmic celebration. I love how Henri Nouwen puts it:

"God rejoices. Not because the problems of the world have been solved; not because all human pain and suffering have come to an end, nor because thousands of people have been converted and are now praising him for his goodness. No, God rejoices because *one* of his children who was lost has been found."

But, if I'm honest, I think the character in this story that I most identify with is the older son. Like him, I don't rejoice like I should at the return of my brothers and sisters. A lot of the time I act as if I simply don't care whether my friends and neighbours get to their heavenly home. I wonder if my problem is that, like the older brother, I don't really appreciate how good it is to be home. That I am home. That's God loves embraces me. Look at what the older boy says: "All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never even gave me a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends" (v 29). His relationship to his dad sounds more like that of a servant than a son. He doesn't realise just how much he is loved. But just as the old man ran out to the prodigal son, he rushes out to this boy, and urges him to join the party: "My son," he says, "you are always with me and everything I have is yours" (v 31). That's what he says to us. "I love you. I'm here for you. All heaven rejoices that you are safe with me. So come share my joy in seeing your lost brothers and sisters come home. There's nothing like it. There's nothing better that you can do with your life."

Questions

1. "I feel a little resentful at the suggestion that we as a church should focus our energies on reaching those outside God's family." Do you agree? How do you respond?
2. In February's *Baptist* magazine Roger Driver-Burgess writes that if we are not seeing people saved we don't have a problem with strategy, we have a problem with sin. "We need more than relevant plans, we need repentance too." What do you think?
3. With which character do you most identify in the story of the prodigal son(s)? The younger son or older son?
4. The lost sheep, coin and son were all enormously valuable. What is your most valued treasure? Can you recall a time when you ever lost something precious? Does it give you a glimpse of the value God places on people?
5. Henri Nouwen, in his superb book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, wrote that, "Jesus himself became the prodigal son for our sake." Do you agree? What are the implications?
6. The image of a shepherd is a symbol throughout the Bible of God's tender care for us (see Isaiah 40:11). How can we show this kind of care to those who are "lost"?
7. How many non-Christian friends do you have? Do you ever feel like the Pharisees, trying to be good and moral but isolated from the world of "sinners"?
8. What are some of the ways in which we could help to lead our lost friends to Christ? What could the church do to assist? What changes can you suggest we make?
9. "There is no greater investment than to help lead one person to Christ." Do you agree?
10. Have you ever known the joy of playing a part in someone's conversion?
11. What is the greatest obstacle you face to sharing your faith with your friends? How might it be removed?
12. Which *one* friend are you going to pray for *one* minute *once* a day?