**THE GOSPEL OF LUKE**

**THE REJOICING GOD**

**PART I**

**Luke 15:1-10**

**INTRODUCTION**

As we continue our series in the Gospel of Luke today, we transition from the topic of the Kingdom of God to a new one that focuses on God’s heart for the lost, and our call to bring the gospel to them.

A few months ago, I discovered a new strategy to accomplish what most parents struggle with when it comes to parenting: teaching young kids to eat their vegetables. Lily, Athan, and Martin are all relatively good at eating their vegetables. Lily is virtually a herbivore, Athan is often seen hogging all the broccoli, and Martin will generally finish all the vegetables on his plate. Benjamin, however, is still a work in progress.

He will eat vegetables by the mouthful if they’re the first thing he eats when he’s really hungry, but if you start him off with something else, the vegetables are usually neglected. When this happens and I try to feed him his vegetables, he will close his eyes and turn away. When he first started doing this, I would use one of two strategies: discipline, or bribery. I would either take away a privilege (“You can’t have dessert if you don’t eat your vegetables”) or give him an unexpected privilege (“You can have dessert if you eat your vegetables”). This generally works, with bribery being much more effective than discipline.

But then one day, I had an epiphany. I realized that there was a third way to not only help him eat his vegetables, but to help him obey in other contexts as well. This third way comes from the Apostle Paul himself in Colossians 3:20, where he says this:

“Children, obey your parents in everything, *for this pleases the Lord*.”

Paul gives a command – “obey your parents in everything” – and he provides the motivation to obey the command – “for this pleases the Lord.” The desire to please God helps us to obey God. Wanting to make God happy is means to be one of the reasons why we want to keep his commands.

Benjamin’s not quite old enough to care about pleasing God, but he is old enough to care about pleasing me, so when I realized this, it inspired me to take a third approach to helping him eat his vegetables. “Benjamin, if you don’t eat your vegetables, Daddy will be sad. But if you do eat them, Daddy will be so happy.” After repeating this a few times, Benjamin happily gobbled up all his vegetables and I showed him how happy I was by cheering, smiling, and jumping up and down with joy.

What makes God happy? What makes God cheer, smile, and jump up and down with joy? If you’re a Christian, then you are an adopted child of God. If you have put your trust in Christ and his death for you on the cross, then God is your Heavenly Father, and you want to please him and make him happy just as much as children want to make their parents happy. But how?

Many things make God happy. God is happy when we commune with him in prayer. God is happy when we get to know him more by reading his Word. God is happy when we obey his commands with a happy heart. I think many of us do these things because we know they’ll make *us* happy, but not many of us do these things because we know they’ll make *God* happy. Doing these things can be like eating our vegetables. It may be painful at first, but we know that in the long run it will do us good. There’s nothing wrong with that, but God wants to add another layer to our motivation for obedience: pleasing him, and making *him* happy.

In our text today, Jesus is going to tell us that leading people to Christ – teaching them to repent of their sins and trust in Christ as Saviour – makes God *very* happy. In fact, it’s what makes God cheer, smile, and jump up and down with joy. God wants his happiness to motivate our evangelism, so that sharing the gospel would be less like pulling teeth and more of a joy, knowing that it’s bringing much joy to our Heavenly Father.

The title of this message is **The Rejoicing God**. This is Part I of a theme that will continue next Sunday as well.My aim today is to show you that **God Celebrates the Salvation of Sinners and Wants Us to Join the Party.**

For the outline of the sermon, we’re going to look at our text today through the three main elements of verse 10, which summarizes our entire text quite well:

1. “…There is joy before the angels of God…”
2. “…over one sinner…”
3. “…who repents.”

(1) **“…THERE IS JOY BEFORE THE ANGELS OF GOD…”**

Our text today begins immediately after Jesus had been talking about the Kingdom of God. He said that the Kingdom of God would be like a great banquet where people from east and west, north and south would be invited to attend and feast with God himself. But there was a problem. The people who were being invited were turning down the invitation because they had other things to do. They had to attend to their property, their possessions, and their families. All good things that climbed too high on the hierarchy of their affections, and because of that, they would be left out of God’s Kingdom forever.

So Jesus warns the crowds that no one can follow him unless they love him above everything else. Your parents, your siblings, your spouse, your children, even your own self all have to take a back seat so that Jesus can take charge of your life. If he doesn’t, then you’re not going to last long on this journey of faith. You might start off well, but you’ll end poorly. You’ll start building the tower of your faith, but you will ultimately leave it forsaken, deserted, and unfinished. You’ll be salt that has lost its saltiness, good for nothing but to be thrown away. Jesus ends Chapter 14 with the phrase, “He who has ears, let him hear”, a phrase he often uses to highlight the seriousness of what he just said.

Who has ears to hear, that they may truly hear what Jesus is saying and believe? Luke shows us in verse 1: “Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to *hear* him.” Tax collectors and sinners – those who had a public reputation of being traitors, cheats, and degenerates – were the ones who had hears to ear. Jesus was inviting them to listen to him, and they were responding.

The Pharisees and the scribes found this deplorable. Luke tells us in verse 2 that they grumbled, saying, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them.’ In their view, a respectable Rabbi like Jesus shouldn’t be rubbing shoulders with tax collectors and sinners. He was supposed to be holy. They were the scum of the earth. “What does righteousness have to do with evil?” they asked. “If he were really God’s prophet, he would have known what kinds of people he’s speaking to and rejected them for the moral degenerates that they are.”

In response, Jesus tells three parables. One’s about a lost sheep, one’s about a lost coin, and one’s about a lost son. We will look at the third parable next Sunday so that we can focus on the first two today.

These two parables have so many of the same elements that it’s obvious that Jesus is making the same point with both of them, which is this: God rejoices over sinners who repent, regardless of how badly they’ve sinned. Both parables contain the same three elements: something is lost, the lost is found, and there’s a big celebration. And given the context, it’s clear that the things that were lost – the sheep and the coin – stand for these tax collectors and sinners.

In this way, Jesus is answering the criticism from the Pharisees and the scribes. He’s saying, “Do you want to know why I receive sinners and eat with them? *Because when they repent, God rejoices*.”

We see that in both verse 7 and verse 10. In verse 7 he says “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” And in verse 10 he says “there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” One describes joy in heaven, the other describes joy before the angels of God, but both are revealing to us that *God* is the one who rejoices. Heaven only rejoices because God is rejoicing, because when God rejoices, he calls all of heaven to rejoice with him.

We see that in the two parables. In verse 6, the shepherd calls together his friends and his neighbours, saying to them, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.” And in verse 9, the woman calls together her friends and neighbours and says, “Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.”

Two parables, but one common message: when sinners repent, God rejoices, and he calls all of heaven to rejoice with him.

Do you think of God as a God who rejoices? Is there room in your theology for a rejoicing God? I think many of us think of God as stoically sitting on his throne, dispassionately dispensing his grace towards unworthy sinners. If he ever feels something, it’s disappointment. Disappointment that we sinned again. Disappointment that our spiritual growth is taking so long. Disappointment that we’re not accomplishing more for his glory.

That’s not true! Jesus tells us that we have a God who *rejoices*, a God who not only celebrates but knows how to throw a party! When he celebrates, he doesn’t do it quietly and subtly so that no one will notice. He invites the hosts of heaven to celebrate with him, to come and fill his Kingdom with the sounds of laughter and joy!

Celebration is one of the things human beings have in common across culture. It may look and sound different from culture to culture, but there’s no mistaking a celebration when it’s happening. So if celebration is part of what it means to be a human, how much more is it a part of God?

Let’s never forget that you and I are made in the image of God. Everything that’s good about being human is true about God, except in infinitely greater degree, including the capacity to rejoice. So think about the times when you’ve felt most joyful. Perhaps it was on a family trip to the cottage. Perhaps it was when you and your best friend laughed so hard at a joke that only the two of you could understand. Perhaps it was on your wedding day. Think about what you felt. Think about the contentment, the peace, the absolute satisfaction that you felt in that moment, and realize that *God feels the same thing*. God rejoices, and he shows us that by creating us as beings who love to rejoice as well.

(2) **“…OVER ONE SINNER…”**

But what does our God rejoice about? What are the moments that cause God’s joy to bubble out into celebration? This leads us to the next part of verse 10 and our second point: “over one sinner”.

Notice that both parables begin with something precious being lost. The shepherd in the first parable has one hundred sheep, which was quite a modest flock at the time. A good sized flock would have been about three hundred sheep, so this shepherd sees every single one of his sheep as immensely valuable. Likewise, the woman in the second parable only had ten silver coins, or *drachmas*, which were each worth about a days’ wage for a labourer. It wasn’t a lot of money, but it was all she had, so losing even one of them would have been devastating. Jesus includes these details to highlight for us that, even though only *one* thing was lost, that *one* thing was immensely valuable.

The value of what is lost is reflected in the diligence of the search. Jesus says in verse 4 that the shepherd leaves the other ninety-nine in the open country and goes after the one that is lost, “until he finds it.” This shepherd isn’t giving up. He’s going to keep looking for his lost sheep until he finds it, whether it’s alive or dead. That’s how precious his lost sheep is to him. And when the sheep is finally found, Jesus tells us in verse 5 that the shepherd lovingly lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing as he carries it back to his flock.

Or take the woman in verse 8. Jesus describes her search in detail. She lights a lamp so that she can look into all the dark corners of her house. She goes on to tidy and sweep the entire house to make sure that not one spot is missed. Like the shepherd, her search is diligent, and she does not give up until the coin is found. And when the coin is found, the woman joyfully calls her loved ones together and invites them to rejoice with her.

So let’s go back to our original question: what does God rejoice over? The answer is that he rejoices over the return of lost sinners. Our God is a God of joy, and one of the things he rejoices over is finding the lost and bringing them back to himself.

But that’s not all. The point here isn’t just that God rejoices over the return of lost *sinners*. The point is that God rejoices over the return of *the* lost *sinner*.

Jesus is speaking in the singular, not the plural. When we talk about “the lost” – about reaching “the lost” and sharing the gospel with “the lost” – we’re speaking in the plural. Not so here.

Verse 7: “There will be more joy in heaven over *one* sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance”. Verse 10: “There is joy before the angels of God over *one* sinner who repents”. These aren’t the parables of the lost flock or the lost coins. They are the parables of the *one* lost sheep, and the *one* lost coin. Jesus isn’t speaking about masses and masses of people. He’s speaking about specific individuals.

I wonder how many of you have thought to yourself, “I’ve shared the gospel so many times but I’ve only seen one person come to Christ. God must be disappointed in me.” Or, perhaps you’ve never seen someone come to Christ, and you’re tempted to believe that it takes so much time, so much energy, and so much heartache that it’s just not worth it. If that’s you, then hear Jesus saying, “Don’t underestimate the value of the *one* lost sinner! *Every* *single sinner who repents* is the cause of a massive celebration in heaven.” God doesn’t only rejoice when “sinners” repent. He rejoices when *one* sinner repents.

So the next time you’re tempted to look back at your gospel harvest and focus more on the people who didn’t respond than those who did, remember that God rejoiced over every single one of those people who responded. Or the next time you’re tempted to believe that investing in that one friend, that one neighbour, that one family member just isn’t worth it, remember that even *one sinner* who repents sets off a heavenly party where God *himself* is leading the celebration.

That’s not all. There’s a personal message here for everyone here who is a Christian, and it’s about the greatness of your own conversion. I know that many of you, not all, but many of you were born into a Christian home, including myself. I know how easy it is to fall into thinking that my faith is somehow worth less because I grew up with the gospel, but that’s absolutely false. Whether you were raised in a Christian home or not, you were spiritually dead in your trespasses and sins and in desperate need of a Saviour. So if you are here today and you profess faith in Christ as the Son of God who died for your sins, it’s only because a miracle has happened in your life. And when that miracle happened, God rejoiced over you. God brought his angels together in heaven and said, “Rejoice! Celebrate with me! For I have found the one who was lost.”

That happened for every single person here who is a true believer. When you repented of your sins and turned to Christ, God had a party *for you*. He didn’t wait until he had a thousand converts, or a hundred converts, or at least one convert who didn’t come from a Christian home. When you turned to him in repentance and faith, he rejoiced with the heavenly hosts because *you* were lost and now are found.

And if God rejoiced over our conversion, how much more should we? Every day, we have reason to celebrate and rejoice, because we once were lost but now are found.

And what about the conversion of others? When someone has come back to God, do we celebrate? Or do we hang back like the Pharisees and grumble, thinking, “*That* sinner’s not good enough to be loved by God”. We’re going to look at this tendency in our hearts a lot more next week in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, but even here, our text warns us that we must not be like the Pharisees who grumbled when God brought people into their exclusive club. Instead, we must be like the friends and neighbours in the parables who come together to rejoice that what was lost has now been found. God celebrates the salvation of sinners and wants us to join the party.

(3) **“…WHO REPENTS.”**

But there is one other element to this question of what makes God rejoice, because of course God doesn’t simply rejoice over sinners. Sin grieves God. It doesn’t make him happy. What *does* make him happy is when sinners *repent*, and this leads to the last part of our verse and our third point: “there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner *who repents*.”

It is repentance that God delights in. Without repentance, there is no rejoicing. Our two parables give us a simple picture of what repentance is: it’s returning to God after we were far from him. The lost sheep is back on the shepherd’s shoulders, and the lost coin is back in the woman’s hand.

Many people think of repentance as primarily a change in behaviour. They think it means that they need to stop doing what’s wrong, and start doing what’s right. That’s true, but only partially so. A change in behaviour is necessary for repentance, but not sufficient. You cannot have repentance without a change in behaviour, but you can have a change in behaviour without repentance. To put it another way, if we’re lost sheep, we can change our behaviour by not rolling in the mud of sin any more, but we haven’t truly repented until we’re back on our shepherd’s shoulders.

In one of the most helpful introductory statements that I’ve encountered about what repentance means, Michael Lawrence writes the following:

“Repenting means exchanging our idols for God. Before it’s a change in behavior, it must be a change in worship.”

I think Lawrence is right. Repentance may result in a change in behaviour, but it comes from a change in worship. If you look at the Old Testament, the call to repent shows up again and again in the same context: Israel sins, the people are oppressed, and God promises deliverance if they repent. The interesting thing about this is that Israel sinned all the time, but not every sin led to oppression. That was reserved for the sin of idolatry. Oppression, and the subsequent call to repent, came because Israel had worshipped idols.

It was false worship that led to the most grievous sins against God, and it was false worship that led to the calls to repent. So when God called Israel to repent, he was calling them to put off their worship of idols, and take up worship of himself once again.

We may not struggle with worshipping physical idols like Israel did, but our struggle with idolatry is no less real than theirs. Anything that we love more than God is an idol. Anything that has more influence in our lives than God is an idol. Anything that we turn to for comfort before God, anything that we turn to for security before God, anything that we turn to for joy before God is an idol. These things can be worldly things like wealth or success, they can be physical things like possessions or sex, or they can be relational things like friends and family. Whatever they may be, for us to truly repent, we must stop orienting our lives around them and make God the center of our lives instead.

This helps us understand why God rejoices over the sinner who repents. He rejoices because the repentant sinner is brought back to *himself*. He finds no delight in cleaner sheep if they’re still far from him. He delights in having his sheep back in his flock, listening to his voice, following his commands, and enjoying his fatherly love.

This is so important for us to understand. I wonder how many of you feel that you can’t approach God after you’ve sinned. You feel that you need to clean up your life first, or change the way you’re living, or feel a certain level of remorse before you can come back to God. You essentially feel like you need to repent first, and then be reconciled second, but that’s not repentance. *Repentance isn’t repentance without reconciliation*. Repentance *must* involve turning back to God, giving up the false worship of false gods and taking up true worship of our true God instead. You haven’t truly repented until you’ve turned back to God in true worship.

Others misunderstand repentance in a different way. They believe that, as long as you feel bad about your sin, you’re repentant. They feel that the more tears they shed, or the more grief they feel, the more repentant they must be. That’s not repentance at all. Repentance should involve grief, but grief doesn’t always involve repentance. Many people grieve over their sin because of how it has hurt them, or because of how it has hurt others, but they don’t grieve over how it has hurt God. They’re grieving over the consequences of their sin rather than the offence of sin against God. That kind of grief may lead to despair. It may even lead to a changed life. But it won’t lead to a return to right worship unless it’s accompanied by an awareness of their sin against *God*.

But if you *do* repent, if you turn back to God acknowledging him as the Lord of your life and the satisfaction of your soul, then God rejoices over *you*. It doesn’t matter how ugly your sin is, and it doesn’t matter how long you’ve strayed from him. If you repent, God will rejoice, for he has found his sheep that was lost.

**CONCLUSION**

So today, where are you with God? Ask yourself honestly now. Are you part of his flock, listening to his voice, obeying his commands, and enjoying his fellowship and protection? Or are you far from him, rolling around in the mud of sin, wandering aimlessly around without God and without hope? If that describes you, then I urge you to *repent*. Don’t wait until you’ve cleaned up your life. Don’t wait until you’ve stopped sinning. Come to him broken, because you can’t fix yourself. Only he can. I can’t say it better than Joseph Hart in his old hymn:

“Come, ye sinners, poor and needy,

Weak and wounded, sick and sore!

Jesus ready stands to save you,

Full of pity, love and power.

He is able, He is able, He is able,

He is willing, doubt no more!

“Come ye weary, heavy laden,

Bruised and mangled by the fall;

If you tarry till you’re better,

You will never come at all.

Not the righteous, Not the righteous, Not the righteous;

Sinners Jesus came to call.”

And if today you are close to God, worshipping him and him alone, then I thank God that he has kept you close to himself. But I must warn you: don’t take it for granted. Cast yourself fully upon him so that you won’t stray from his side, and if you do stray, then you won’t stray for long. Any one of us can leave him at any time. That’s how sinful we are. We need his constant, sufficient grace to bind our hearts to himself.

Repentance isn’t just a one time thing. It’s not something that happened once in your lifetime when you responded at an altar call or when you wept once over your sin. Repentance is a consistent, even daily practice of reorienting our hearts away from idols and back towards the true worship of God. And every time we repent, every time we turn away from our sin and turn back to our great shepherd, he rejoices. He rejoices over *you*. *You* can make God *very* happy not just once, but always, if you live a life of repentance.

Let me end with these great words from Zephaniah 3:17, which are true in an intensely personal way for all who have repented. These words are God’s personal words spoken over *you*, not just you in the plural as his people, but you in the singular as individuals, for God rejoices over the *one* sinner who repents. This is what the Lord says:

“The LORD your God is in your midst,

A mighty one who will save;

He will rejoice over *you* with gladness;

He will quiet *you* by his love;

He will exult over *you* with loud singing.”