It’s all about the party!

Have you ever noticed the celebration in each of the parables of lost things (sheep, coin, son—Luke 15)? In each story, something is lost and then found, then there’s a party. Far from being an incidental detail, the party is actually the key event in all three of these parables.

In the parable of the lost sheep, the shepherd calls his friends together, saying “Rejoice with me.” Jesus draws his lesson from this: “Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” (vs. 6-7)

The woman who finds her coin also calls her neighbors to share in her rejoicing. Again, Jesus states the main point: “Just so, I tell you there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” (vs. 10)

And finally, in the Prodigal Son parable, the party is the main event. The older brother is not upset because his brother returned home, nor because his father received him with open arms. It is the celebration that causes his jealousy. “You never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends.” The father answers: “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad.” (vs. 29-32)

What is the significance of the celebration? Consider the surprising statement in Jesus’ application of the lost sheep parable: there is *more* joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than ninety-nine who need no repentance. Why is that? The lost son caused the Father grief and concern; the lost sheep caused the Shepherd to go out looking for him; and the lost coin caused anxiety for the woman. Perhaps we can understand the older brother’s complaint. Why have a party? Why is there *more* joy for him?

This question gets at the heart of the purpose for these parables. Here is the context: “Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, ‘This man receives sinners and eats with them.’” (Luke 15:1-2) Jesus responds with the three parables mentioned above.

We can infer from the repeated mentions of the celebration that Jesus was joyful at the response of these sinners—in contrast to the bitter disdain of the Pharisees and scribes. The parables justify the rejoicing that accompanied these sinners “drawing near to hear.”

There is joy when a mission has been accomplished, rejoicing when a search is over. And of course, any parent can relate to the joy that one would feel over finding a lost child. When we understand the Father’s love for his children, we can better appreciate the celebration for any who returns home.

Perhaps the party also indicates the difficulty of true repentance. Frankly, it’s not that hard to “stay at home” like the older brother and do the right thing. It comes easily for some. But for one who has wandered off and become a slave to sin, turning his or her life around and having the humility to come home, the contrition to beg for forgiveness, and the determination to change—that’s a cause for heavenly celebration.

Another lesson we can draw from these parables is this: you don’t get a party for doing the right thing. The older brother who stayed home was blessed to be in the father’s presence and had a great inheritance waiting for him. But he didn’t get a celebration for doing what he was supposed to do. As Jesus says in another passage: “So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’” (Luke 17:10)

If you have never strayed far from home (spiritually speaking), how blessed you are! If you have avoided the pitfalls of various fleshly temptations, if you’ve always “just said ‘no’”, if you’ve never considered quitting the Lord and his church—wonderful. But don’t expect a party. You’re just doing what you’re supposed to do.

If, however, you have left home and the Lord and gone out to see what the deceptive ways of sin have to offer, you’ve surely found that the world offers a hollow and short-lived satisfaction at best. Have the courage and good sense to realize you were better off in the Father’s house. Come home. He’s waiting to celebrate over you.

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