

Love Ahead (Don't Slow Down)

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Approx. 21 minutes

Luke 15:1-20

- ¹ Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. ² But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."**
- ³ Then Jesus told them this parable: ⁴ "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ⁵ And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶ and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' ⁷ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.**
- ⁸ "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹ And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' ¹⁰ In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."**
- ¹¹ Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. ¹² The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.**
- ¹³ "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. ¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. ¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.**
- ¹⁷ "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! ¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. ¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' ²⁰ So he got up and went to his father.**
- "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.**

The audience is gathering for the show!

One of my hobbies is community theatre, I do quite a bit of “acting,” if you can call it that, so I guess I tend to see things in theatrical terms.

So to me, this passage from Luke 15 is kind of like a play.

I don’t mean just the story Jesus told was like a play.

I mean the whole episode, starting from when the audience began arriving to experience the experience.

Luke 15:

1 Now the tax collectors and “sinners” were all gathering around to hear him.

2 But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

He’s getting a bad review from the critics even before the curtain goes up!

Let’s understand the cast of characters here, starting with the audience.

Tax collectors in those days are despised because the way the tax system is structured, it allows these guys to rip you off and benefit from it personally — and they usually do.

They’re working for the Roman government, which is controlling the Jewish people, and the tax collectors’ job is to take money out of Jewish pockets and put it into the Roman pocket.

So from the standpoint of Jesus’ audience, in this moment, tax collectors are hated.

In fact, sometimes, when Jesus uses shorthand to talk about people regarded as “bad people,”

he uses a demographic example to paint the picture for his audience —

he talks about “tax collectors and prostitutes”!

It’s like mixing up a sinful soup.

And people known as “sinners” — down through the centuries, the translators of Scripture have put it in quotes, because the term had special significance in this setting —

these were people who didn’t fulfill the ritualistic rules that the religious leaders of the day had set up.

If there were any Gentiles in the crowd, they would fall into this category.

But it’s likely that there were way more Jewish people in the crowd, and to be regarded as a “sinner” in the Jewish culture meant you weren’t ceremonially pure:

Either you weren’t caught up on your schedule of sacrifices,

or you had caved in and done some kind of work on the Sabbath, which was prohibited,

or you had done something that violated the Pharisees’ rigid behavioral standards.

So in the tax collectors and these so-called sinners, you have people who intended to do wrong, and people who just wound up doing wrong whether they wanted to or not —

which covers most of us.

But then there were the Pharisees — these were the members of the most exclusive religious club of the day.

They had set up a strict and complicated set of rules to keep themselves from coming even close to breaking any of the Ten Commandments.

And they made it their business to beat up on anybody who didn’t observe all of their extra manmade rules.

And along with them, in Jesus' audience today, are the teachers of the law. This refers to the religious law — not only the Law of God that Moses laid down in the Old Testament, but also the manmade laws that the rabbis and religious leaders had added to it. The teachers of the law were the guys who were dedicating their lives to raising up the next generation of Jewish children correctly. They were passionate about preserving the religious standards.

And of course in the beginning the intentions of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law had been good. They loved God, and they loved his Word. They saw that the Ten Commandments embodied God's design for people to live successfully by. But over time, they got so focused on the law that they lost track of WHY God had given it in the first place — out of LOVE for people, to help us have richer, more rewarding lives. I would go so far as to say, these religious leaders actually lost touch with God himself, their relationship with God kept atrophying, until there was practically no relationship there at all.

And without that heart, without that relationship, they became nothing more than taskmasters; their hearts grew colder, and harder; they became more interested in maintaining control of people than in loving and caring for people. They became harsher and more judgmental.

Now what did they feel *Jesus* was doing wrong?

Well, just about everything.

Jesus was healing people on the Sabbath — the Pharisees said you shouldn't do any work whatsoever on the Sabbath, and they judged that *healing somebody* was technically *work*.

Jesus was socializing with sinners — the Pharisees said you should keep yourself at a clear distance from people whom they regarded as spiritually inferior, so you wouldn't get any sin-cooties on you.

Jesus treated women with respect and love — the Pharisees said a man shouldn't be seen even talking with a woman, for fear of any impropriety even crossing his mind.

And on and on.

They had a long, long list of grievances against Jesus.

It's significant that verse 1 says the supposedly "bad" people were "gathering around" Jesus,

while the supposedly "good" people — the Pharisees and religious scholars — REPELLED the bad people.

(In fact, they were complaining that Jesus ought to be repelling them himself!)

So Jesus begins to tell stories,

to try to get his entire audience —

the poor sinners as well as these holier-than-thou "saints" —

to understand *the real heart of God for people*.

Regular everyday people.

People like you and me.

3 Then Jesus told them this parable:

4 "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost

sheep until he finds it?

This is not a hypothetical situation or a fairy tale that Jesus is telling here.

In those days, sheep were a sign of wealth.

They provided wool, they provided meat, and they served as sacrifices in worship.

You could gauge how rich somebody was by how many sheep they owned.

And if you were a shepherd, and you lost one of the boss's sheep,

you either had to prove that the animal had been killed by a predator, or you had to pay for the sheep yourself.

If a wolf or bear or lion carried off one of your sheep, how could you go after it?

The beast would tear you to pieces.

If he consumed the whole sheep, or carried it off, you had no evidence to show.

And on a shepherd's pay, to reimburse the owner for a sheep would be financially devastating.

So a shepherd in those days had HUGE incentive to track down a single lost sheep.

5 And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders

6 and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me;

Today we would probably say, "Yo, good news!"

I have found my lost sheep.'

7 I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who

do not need to repent.

What does this mean?

These days people don't like the idea of "repenting," but it really means *changing direction*.

Switching from destructive ways of thinking and acting — to constructive ways of thinking and acting. Healthy lifestyle choices.

If I'm not living a life of love, I'm hurting myself.

If I'm deluding myself into thinking I'm better than you, my spirit is corroding.

If I'm living a life of fear, or anger, or selfishness, that's unhealthy for me.

Jesus is saying, when I turn that corner, toward the life he keeps calling me to, a life of love and peace and joy and freedom, that's a good life.

That's worth celebrating.

8 "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one.

Why a woman?

Because in the culture of Jesus' earthly life and work, this would have been a big deal.

Maybe bigger than you would realize.

Let me try to explain it this way.

My two big kids are grownups now, 31 and 32 years old, but when they were little, 8 and 9 years old, they got an allowance.

Here's how we did it at our house — this was back in the late 90s:

The kids only got a dollar apiece once a week.

One measly dollar!

They got the dollar for nothing, though.

They had certain chores, but you had to do your chores regardless.

The allowance wasn't tied to any of that.

You got a dollar every weekend, just for being you.

However, to teach our children the value of saving their money

and delaying gratification

instead of spending everything at the first possible moment,

we had what we called "Doubling Day."

On the 20th of the month, each one would bring me any money they had, and I would match it, dollar-for-dollar.

You bring me \$5, I give you another \$5; suddenly you have \$10.

How much can you save?

If I double your money this week, can you save it until next month and double the whole amount again? Yes.

You bring me \$25, I give you another \$25; suddenly you have \$50? Yes.

At our house, on Doubling Day, Dad would match whatever money you could produce, up to a total of \$100.

So one day, my 8-year-old Kristofer had squirreled away his dollars, week after week, until he was up to \$5.

In fact, he was very proud — in advance of Doubling Day, he had turned in his five George Washingtons for a single Abraham Lincoln. A \$5 bill!

And of course he was really looking forward to Doubling Day, because Abraham Lincoln was going to turn into Alexander Hamilton.

And then, one day, without warning, I found him crying. Heartbroken.

He couldn't find that \$5 bill anywhere. It was lost.

He turned his room upside down. He looked in every nook and cranny. I helped

him search.

He was so heartbroken that even his 9-year-old sister Natalie was moved with compassion and helped him search.

But nothing. The \$5 bill was nowhere.

It was only \$5, which is not that big a deal to you or me, but you could see on this little guy's face, the tragedy of it.

He understood the value.

He had saved for 5 solid weeks, which to an 8-year-old is like eternity.

This is the kind of anguish that Jesus was talking about in this parable of the lost coin.

Here again, he's not making up a fairy tale.

In the culture of that day, a new bride wore a headband to signify that she was now a wife.

This headband had ten silver coins mounted on it.

It was the equivalent of our modern-day engagement ring or wedding ring.

Now if my wife loses her engagement ring, I can tell you right now, I'm going to have a heart attack.

By our family's standards, it's an expensive piece of jewelry.

In the same way, in Jesus's day, a significant portion of a family's fortune could be tied up in the wife's headband.

The coins in the headband had not only enormous sentimental value, but also real financial value.

To lose even one of those coins would be a huge tragedy.

Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it?

9 And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; [Hey, good news!] I have found my lost coin.’
10 In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Someone who’s been hurting themselves, who realizes the error, and turns the corner, and starts living differently.

So the day came when my 8-year-old son came to me with an amazing smile.

He was normally a very smiley kid, but now his face was GLOWING.

He held up a \$5 bill.

“Found it!” he said. “It was in my pocket!”

That was one happy little boy. He was celebrating!

And I was giggling, Mommy was giggling, even big sister was celebrating!

Kristofer found his \$5 bill!

Rejoice!

That’s the feeling Jesus was describing in this parable.

Why is it such a big deal?

Because if I’m not living a life of love, of peace, of joy, I’m living a diminished life.

Short of my potential.

Instead of loving people, and trusting in the power of love, I’m withdrawing, or I’m suspicious, or I’m fearful, or I’m angry — I’m exhausting my life’s energies, because this is not how I’m designed to live most effectively.

And look at how Jesus constructed these two stories.

The sheep was in the fold. *Then* it got lost.

The coin was in the headband. *Then* it got lost.

All they needed was to be *found*.

Not to go through some ritual of restoration.

Not to submit to some religious timetable or jump through some hoops.

When I've been living outside of the power of love, and I turn back to receive that love, love happens.

I'm found.

Right away!

* * *

But then Jesus tells one final story. Because there's one more idea to plant in our hearts.

You probably know this story. I won't re-read it to you. We typically refer to it as the parable of the prodigal son.

The man has two sons,

the younger one demands his inheritance, heads out, squanders it, his life deteriorates,

the lightbulb finally goes on over his head, and he heads home, hoping for something better.

But let's fast-forward, and look at what the father does: two tiny but significant words, in verse 20: **he ran** to his child.

In the culture of ancient Palestine, it was a societal protocol that adult men never ran.

It was considered unseemly.

And the wealthier you were, the more restrictive this custom was:

a rich man would never, *never* be seen *running*.

But in the story as Jesus tells it, this father ran.

The moment he saw his child was heading in his direction, he ran.

He was in a hurry to make things right.

Why? Because even *one more day* of living apart from the power of love is *more harm than you need*. More pain. More unnecessary suffering.

Love is in a hurry.

When my little boy lost his \$5 bill, he scrambled to find it.

He was in a frenzy — for a little while.

But eventually, after a day, he gave it less energy.

He would look for it a little while, then move on to other things.

Days went by.

Actually, a couple of weeks went by.

When he finally turned up that \$5 bill, we really rejoiced.

But there had been a loss in the process.

Doubling Day had come and gone.

When the big day arrived, Kristofer didn't have anything to have matched.

(Did I go backwards in time and match his contribution?

I'm not telling you. That's not my point this morning. Here's the point:)

Every day I live outside of the realm of love, I'm losing.

Every day I live a life of anger or fear or selfishness, I'm losing out.

I'm missing out on the flow of blessings into my life.

I'm missing out on the benefit of the love that I was originally designed to thrive in.

The prodigal son, in Jesus' story, went through a long period of making excuses for his selfishness, his withdrawal, the choices he was making.

And I tend to do the same thing.

I get irked at you about something, and I justify myself:

That wasn't the right way to behave.

I'm only reacting the way any reasonable person would.

No one should have to put up with this kind of situation.

If everybody acted the way they acted, what would the world come to?

Life is too short to put up with someone like that.

Who could blame me for withdrawing? Or warning other people about the kind of person they turned out to be? Or engaging in some other subtle act of revenge?

This isn't holding a grudge, this is just common sense.

Who's suffering here? I am.

My ability to hurt you is limited, but my ability to hurt myself — the one person I have any real control over — that's significant.

I've decided to turn away from love.

In the process, I'm hurting myself a lot.

I am withering, spiritually. Not growing. Dying.

Jesus is saying, through these three little stories:

Turn back to love. Trust the power of love. Don't wait. Hurry.

The clock is ticking. It's heartbreaking to waste even a single day of this life.

You are loved. Love wants to find you. So you can *live* in love. Hurry.