

# THE JOY OF GOD'S HEART

By Rev. Will Nelken

*Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, California, on Sunday, November 2, 2014*

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Have you ever found yourself in a social setting that was uncomfortable—perhaps because there were unfamiliar people present? Or, perhaps there were undesirable people present?

How did you manage that tension? Did you band together in little cliques to talk about them? Or, did you simply ignore them?

Have you ever tried to *bridge* the divide? I mean, have you ever intentionally tried to diffuse the tension and discover the things you shared in common with them. After all, once you get beneath the surface, people aren't all that different from each other—they share similar needs and desires, and similar fears and self-doubts.

In fact, it was those very human commonalities that drew together the oddest crowds whenever Jesus was in town.

Luke 15

<sup>1</sup> *Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach.*

What a startling appeal Jesus had! What an interesting church that would have been. Is your church like that?

Why did they come? Because Jesus truly cared for them and made them feel welcome. He treated them with respect and told them the truth. So they came to listen—and they came often.

<sup>2</sup> *This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that he was associating with such sinful people—even eating with them!*

Notorious sinners and teachers of religious law, sitting side by side as Jesus taught! It was enough to make the religious crowd cringe. And murmur and complain.

Religious folks often think they know how *other* people should behave, because they have developed for themselves so many rules of religious behavior. The oddest thing is that they think that even people who are NOT religious should still behave in religious fashion, and they will scold them for failing to do so.

What I find particularly odd about that is that this notion presumes that religious people and non-religious people are the same except for their outward behavior. And that would mean

that behavior is the only feature that distinguishes the godly from the heathen. I think that is a deceptive notion, for anyone can change their behavior *temporarily* for a cause—if threatened or rewarded sufficiently—but that’s only a superficial change and often fleeting. Is a religion that is so superficial and fickle really worthwhile?

Is a God who can do no more than demand behavioral conformity, and chide its failure, worthy of your worship?

Shouldn’t real religion—true spirituality—go deeper, and effect an inner transformation that perseveres? Jesus thought so.

The religious crowd thought that great teachers, like Jesus, should be reserved just for them. They considered the rest of the crowd gate-crashers or worse.

Aware of this sneering division, and how the religious leaders complained against Him for receiving everyone who came to Him, Jesus addressed the elephant in the room in a way that would not deepen the divide. He used stories that spoke to their common needs and concerns.

*<sup>3</sup> So Jesus told them this story: <sup>4</sup> “If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, what will he do? Won’t he leave the ninety-nine others in the wilderness and go to search for the one that is lost until he finds it? <sup>5</sup> And when he has found it, he will joyfully carry it home on his shoulders. <sup>6</sup> When he arrives, he will call together his friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.’ <sup>7</sup> In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven’t strayed away!*

*<sup>8</sup> “Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Won’t she light a lamp and sweep the entire house and search carefully until she finds it? <sup>9</sup> And when she finds it, she will call in her friends and neighbors and say, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found my lost coin.’ <sup>10</sup> In the same way, there is joy in the presence of God’s angels when even one sinner repents.”*

What have you lost that put you in distress? I have lost car keys, wallets, phones, and even children. I *get* this story! I feel the pain, and the compulsion.

Some of you are aware that I am something of a geek and an early adopter of new technology. I got up at 3am to get in line for the first iPad. Recently, after using my iPhone 4s for three years (skipping over the fifth generation iPhone altogether), I was privileged to purchase a new iPhone 6 Plus. Although I ordered it shortly after midnight on the morning it was released, I had to wait for 3 weeks for it to arrive. But it was worth it!

And then, just five days later, when I had laid it down and walked out of the room briefly, it was stolen. *Stolen!* And immediately turned off so I could not locate it. I was heartsick (and walletsick, too!). I searched for it. Others searched for it, too. I initiated the Find My iPhone

feature, but the phone has not yet been powered on for weeks. I spent three days in the process of reporting the loss to the various authorities. Fortunately, I still had my old phone and was able to reactivate it for my use.

Things like livestock, and personal treasures—and even phones—are significant possessions, and their loss can be distressing. I think both notorious sinners and religious leaders alike could agree with that and find common ground there.

But Jesus was only using those things as illustrations of something far more important and valuable: a human soul, even a sinful soul.

You see, not everyone values sinful people. Religious people especially despise them and prefer not to associate with them. But God loves them. Even the angels in Heaven love them. And they throw a party every time *one sinner* turns away from a life of self-will and turns to a life with God. *God is overjoyed!*

Jesus drove the point home with a third story—not about stuff, but about sons. No livestock or pets, or money or stuff shares the value of a child. We've all been children and know how significant our parents were in our growing up years. And we'll all either have our own children or have friends with children to know the other side of that story—the longings, the fears, the care and concern, the sacrifice, and, yes, the losses. Where is God in that saga of child-raising? What does He know and how does He feel about it? Much in every way.

<sup>11</sup> *To illustrate the point further, Jesus told them this story: "A man had two sons. <sup>12</sup> The younger son told his father, 'I want my share of your estate now before you die.' So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons.*

<sup>13</sup> *"A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living. <sup>14</sup> About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. <sup>15</sup> He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his fields to feed the pigs. <sup>16</sup> The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything.*

Think for a moment of all that young man had lost, all that he had taken for granted and forfeited in his careless pursuit of pleasure. Think of the privilege from which he had come and the squalor to which he was reduced. Pig food was looking good to him, and he hadn't a friend in the world. Then he woke up—not from a dream, but to reality.

<sup>17</sup> *"When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, 'At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! <sup>18</sup> I will go home to my father and say, "Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, <sup>19</sup> and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant."'*

<sup>20</sup> *“So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. <sup>21</sup> His son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.’*

<sup>22</sup> *“But his father said to the servants, ‘Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. <sup>23</sup> And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, <sup>24</sup> for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.’ So the party began.*

This young man had lost far more than his inheritance. He had lost his dignity and his identity. He had become a nobody—a person others ignored or didn’t even notice. Perhaps you fail to notice some of the homeless in a similar way.

But God sees them, and God sees you. And He doesn’t see as much difference between you as you might think.

What *is it* that attracts God’s favorable attention? What is it for which He waits with patient longing? Isn’t it that awakening to reality? That return of common sense? That heart of contrition? That renewal of purpose? That humility of mind?

Yes, God waits with “love and compassion.” But He doesn’t wait until you make the long journey home; He only waits until you start the journey—and then He runs to meet you, to embrace you, to kiss you—for you have become His son again, you have returned from the distant dead to be at His side, to dwell in His house. And so the party begins!

The Father celebrates. His servants celebrate. All of His household has come to life again, because one sinner returned!

Of course, not everyone feels that way about having prodigals—sinners—in the house. Some church people—some brothers or sisters—are too ashamed, too embarrassed, or too angry to receive them. Some are too “religious” to forgive or accept them.

<sup>25</sup> *“Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house, <sup>26</sup> and he asked one of the servants what was going on.*

<sup>27</sup> *‘Your brother is back,’ he was told, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf. We are celebrating because of his safe return.’*

<sup>28</sup> *“The older brother was angry and wouldn’t go in. His father came out and begged him, <sup>29</sup> but he replied, ‘All these years I’ve slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. <sup>30</sup> Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!’*

<sup>31</sup> *“His father said to him, ‘Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours. <sup>32</sup> We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!’ ”*

If you are on the religious side of the room today, thinking harsh thoughts toward those whose lives are upside down, listen to what the Father says, “Dear son, everything I have is yours, and always has been.” If you would appreciate more of all that God has given you, there would be less time and energy for you to grouse about others. Self-pity only makes you pitiful. God is gracious to all, and that’s why He’s so good to you!

People—all kinds of people—are the joy of God’s heart! He has more than enough love to welcome us home. He has more than enough grace to erase the distance between us. He has more than enough provision to take care of you. He has more than enough opportunity to last you for the rest of your life.

And all because of Jesus, who paid the price in our place by His death, and rose again to give us His everlasting life.

Remember Him today. Receive Him today. Become the joy of His heart. There will be a party! Of that you can be sure.