

"LOST BUT FOUND"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

Ken Davis has a book with a rather intriguing title, I Don't Remember the Skunk, But I Do Remember Trying to Breathe. He shares a delightful story with us. He writes that one morning soon after he and his wife, Diane, were married that he saw her wedding ring lying on the bathroom sink. And he thought it would be fun to make her think that it was lost...and so he picked up the ring and hid it. That same evening, Diane asked him if he had seen her ring. He wasn't ready for the joke to be over and so he said "no"...."he hadn't". In the middle of the night he woke up to the sound of uncontrollable sobbing. Still half asleep, he mumbled, "Dianne...what's wrong?"

"Nothing" was Diane's reply. By now he was wide awake. How was it possible to be crying uncontrollably in the middle of the night over nothing? Finally, after a bit of probing, Diane blurted out, "I've lost my wedding ring".

"What a relief" Ken thought to himself. This was something he could solve immediately and so he confessed to his recent bride, Diane...."I have your ring..." thinking, of course, that she would give him a hug in relief and he could then go back to sleep. But the hug never came. "What...." she growled. Ken said,

"I took your ring as a joke.....I know just where it is, so you can go back to sleep." He goes on to write, "It was dark....so I didn't see her fist coming...but I did feel it land. In twenty years of marriage, that was the only time she ever hit me. It was also the last time I ever took her wedding ring...."

DEVELOPMENT

A great story. It reminds me of an item that was in the newspaper some time back. A new bride accidentally flushed her \$1800 diamond wedding ring down the toilet. Her husband, who was still making payments on the ring, wasn't going to let this one-carat diamond get away without a fight. So he first spent the night digging up the yard and tearing up the plumbing searching for the ring. The wife spent the night at her sister's house because...in her words,

"He was really upset...and I didn't want to be around him."

By morning the frustrated groom felt the ring was no longer in the plumbing system in his house, so he called the water department. The city sent out its "lost diamond crew" to assist in the search for this tiny, valuable rock. After installing a trap at a downstream manhole, they flushed the pipe by sending a high pressure stream of water down the sewer pipe. Then one of the crew crawled down into the manhole and fished the diamond ring out of the sewage.

Most of us, I would gather, at least temporarily have lost something valuable to us. And how characteristic it is of the teachings of Jesus that He took one of the most familiar situations in human life and used that situation to teach us something about God. Here in Chapter Fifteen of Luke's Gospel we read about a woman who lost not a ring, but a valuable coin. Let's think about it here this morning for a few minutes and see if it has something to say to us.

Now it may be difficult for us to relate to this. After all, our coins are worth so little and we can't really picture anyone going to such great lengths to find a single coin, but hold on for a moment...

Adrian Rogers, a Baptist preacher, has come up with an interesting perspective on this story. Remember how Jesus begins this story?

"What woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it?"
(Luke 15: 8)

What's the significance of the number "10"? Adrian Rogers suggests that these "10 silver coins" that Jesus was referring to were valuable because of the sentiment attached to them. When a man took a bride, he would give her a ribbon on which would be strung ten coins. She would wear this token of love on her head even as women do in the Middle East today. Like a wedding band, these coins represented the marital relationship. And often on each piece of silver the name of the husband would be engraved. If the woman was unfaithful to her husband...if a woman was caught in adultery, one of those coins would be taken out leaving a gap to show that she had disgraced the wedding vows. Now we can clearly see and appreciate why this woman was searching so frantically for the lost coin. It wasn't as though she had lost a few dollars. Her reputation and marriage were at stake.

Fortunately the woman did find the coin. And when she found it, remember what she did? She called together all of her friends and her neighbors and said,

"Rejoice with me...for I have found the coin that I had lost". (And then Jesus adds the moral to the story...) "Just so....I tell you...there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."
(Luke 15: 10)

Let me ask you a question: do you really believe what Jesus is saying here, that...

"There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents?"

Do you really believe that? Jesus must have believed it, for He made the same essential point in this same chapter. First, in the Parable of the Lost Sheep. Then in the Parable of the Lost Coin. And finally, in that beautiful Parable of the Lost Son which we know as the Parable of the Prodigal Son. In each one, Jesus repeats this theme. God, He claims, rejoices over the sinner who comes home. Do you really believe this....that there is rejoicing up there in heaven every time a sinner repents? Jesus apparently did, and I would like to believe or I would like to think that we believe this, too!

SIN IS A SERIOUS BUSINESS

For us to believe that there is rejoicing in heaven when a sinner repents is to believe, first of all, that sin is serious business. That alone is a stumbling block for many of us. We don't really take sin seriously. We're a bit like a legal client I heard about recently.

While working as a court-appointed attorney, Emory Potter was assigned a client who had been accused of criminal trespass. Mr. Potter probed his client with some general questions of a background nature. He asked his client if he had any previous arrests or convictions. The man ashamedly said, "Yes, sir... I've got quite a few." The attorney then asked, "Any felonies?" And the man rather indignantly replied, "No sir....I specialize in misdemeanors!"

I think that sounds like many of us. We know in our minds that we are sinners....but we specialize in misdemeanors, not in felonies....that is, we specialize in small sins, not the large ones and perhaps in our minds, ours are excusable sins. We're like the Pharisee who thanked God he wasn't like the tax collector. His sins fell within a range of acceptability.

The British actor, Peter Ustinov, said that he once dreamed he had been elected Pope. And in his dream he saw smoke rising from the chimney pots and heard people saying that he must go out on the balcony and wave and that he must choose a name. Under pressures he came up with a name. He cried out it is,,

"NOT GUILTY, THE FIRST!"

The Bishops and the Cardinals were dismayed. "Don't you mean INNOCENT?" they all asked him. "I'm not Innocent" replied Ustinov....."I'm just not guilty" Well....that's many of us.....we're not innocent. We are just not guilty. We're not perfect, but our sins are really not that serious in our estimation. They're misdemeanors. Not felonies.

And yet....according to Jesus....there really is no such thing as a misdemeanor. To those who prided themselves on never committing adultery, Jesus said if you have looked upon a woman with lust, you have already committed adultery in your heart. To those who prided themselves that they had never committed violence, Jesus said that anyone who ever said, "YOU FOOL" was in danger of hell.

Sin is an attitude of the heart. Just because you were never provoked enough to actually strike out at another human being does not mean you are innocent. Just because you have never been put in a situation where it became easy to cheat on your spouse does not mean your heart is pure. Sin is serious business. It crouches there in every heart...eager to spring forward to do some damage....to devour homes and lives and careers. Sin is serious business and there's lots of it, as Ernie Banks, the great Hall of Famer, Chicago Cub shortstop once reminded me. It was up at Cooperstown and we were standing next to each other in line for the buffet.

"And what do you do?" he asked. I told him I was a clergyman in New York City. He's a church-goer in California. "Imagine" he said.."being a clergyman in New York City...why..WHY there's just so much sin!" I never forgot that....from Ernie (Let's play 2) Banks.

PEOPLE REALLY CAN REPENT FROM THEIR SIN

believe if you believe there is "rejoicing in heaven" whenever a sinner comes home! Let's move on.

Sin is serious business...that's the first thing you would have to

In the second place, you would have to believe that people really can repent from their sin. If people can't repent from their sins, then there can be no "rejoicing" in heaven. Unfortunately....there's much skepticism now-a-days that people really can repent and turn their lives around.

Norman Vincent Peale once told about addressing a Methodist Conference in Atlanta along with another fine preacher, Bishop Noah Moore, and Pierce Harris, a much-loved local pastor. In his sermon Peale said that he believed with all of his being that Jesus Christ could come into a life, change it...no matter how hopeless it seemed. After the service, when he and the other guest preachers were relaxing in the minister's study, they were told that a man outside wanted to see them....a somewhat disreputable looking man - unshaven, unwashed, poorly dressed. When the man came in, he was reeking of alcohol, but his mind was full of the message he had just heard and he asked Dr. Peale,

"Do you really believe that Jesus can help me?" "Without a doubt", Peale responded. And then the man asked if they would pray with him and so the ministers prayed with the man. When he went out, Bishop Moore said, a bit wistfully, "If that man changes, we'll be surprised...won't we?" There it was...a flicker of doubt...that change is possible for some people.

Six months later, Dr. Peale was sitting in the lobby of a hotel in Clearwater, Florida, when he saw a man coming toward him...leading two little girls by the hand. The man was immaculately dressed and well shaved. At first Peale didn't recognize who he was, but then as he came closer, Peale recognized this former derelict from Atlanta. There was a smile on the man's face and he was humming the hymn we'll be closing with....."Amazing Grace"....and he put out his hand in greeting. Norman Vincent Peale said it was one of the most emotional and unforgettable encounters in his entire ministry.

People can change. It doesn't happen easily. So many who try end up falling short...failing. In fact, anyone who has ever studied Twelve Step Programs and other attempts to transform human behavior will tell you that people almost never really change unless God is somehow involved. God can change the human heart. To believe that "there is rejoicing in heaven over the sinner" who comes home is first to believe that sin is serious business and second that repentance is possible. And there's one more insight to consider and take away with us.

GOD REALLY DOES FORGIVE THE REPENTANT SINNER

give the repentant sinner.

Finally, it is to believe that God really does for-

Yes - God really does forgive. I think that many people go on living joyless lives because even though they no longer live the sinful lives they once did, they don't really believe...deep down....that God has forgiven them. Maybe they just don't realize how much God loves to forgive. Forgiveness is what God is all about.

There's a beautiful story about a widow who lost her only son as well as her husband during the Second World War. She was especially bitter because her neighbor, who had five sons, lost none of them. One night while this woman's grief was so terribly severe, she had a dream where an angel stood before her and said:

"If you might have your son back again for ten minutes, what ten minutes of his life would you choose? Would you have him back as a little baby...a dirty-faced little boy, a schoolboy just starting off to school...a student completing High School, or as a young soldier who marched off so bravely to war."

The mother thought for a few minutes and then, in her dream, said to the angel, she would choose none of those times. She said,

"Let me have him back...when as a little boy, in a moment of anger, he doubled up his fists and shook them at me and said, 'I hate you....I hate you!' (Continuing to address the angel, she added....) "In a little while his anger subsided and he came back to me...his dirty little face stained with tears and put his arms around me and said, 'Momma....I'm sorry I was so naughty....I promise never to be bad again...and I love you with all my heart!'"

"Let me have him back then...." the mother sobbed. "I never loved him more than at that moment when he changed his attitude and came back to me."

You see...here in this scripture Jesus was trying to help us see that this is how God really feels about each one of us. It reminds us, first, that sin is a serious business. Second, that God is there to help us conquer those sins. Even more, there is forgiveness - complete, total, unlimited forgiveness... and it's available to all who ask for it, who sincerely seek it. And that's why "even the angels rejoice whenever one who has been lost has been found".

Who knows: perhaps there is one person present here this morning who needs to hear this lifting word. If so....I hope you'll hear it...and take it along with you.

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your nearness and to Your presence in these moments, O God. Wrestle with us in the dark and shadowy corners of our lives where sin and selfishness seem to be at work. And now confirm within us the feelings...the decisions of these moments...the intentions and resolutions that are quietly forming in each life present. Remind us, once again, dear God...that the race we run is so short even at its longest. And we would try so hard to run it well, and always to Your glory. In the name and spirit of Christ, we pray. Amen.