

When the Kingdom Comes Close: The Search Party

Luke 15:1–10

Main Idea: The Kingdom comes close because the King searches relentlessly for the lost, heaven celebrates when they are found, and Christ sends His church to join the Search Party.

"I Didn't Get Lost on Purpose."

I am a house shoe guy. My dad was a house shoe guy. We were raised to be civilized, house shoe people. You barefoot home wanderers are living in the Dark Ages.

I remember one time not so long ago, looking for some cheap shoes to wear around the house at a big box store. While in that area of the store, I remember hearing several announcements over the store's seldom-used public address system looking for a lost little boy. And then I saw them. A fleet of people in blue vests swarming the store. And then eventually, a frazzled mom with a few little kiddos climbing around a grocery cart.

And then, suddenly, the little fella was found not far from the house shoe section. And his mom was at first relieved, and then infuriated! As she corrected her young roustabout, he replied, choking on his sobbing, "But mom, I didn't get lost on purpose!"

I didn't get lost on purpose! One moment, he was looking at toys or cereal boxes and then he looked up and mom was gone. And then suddenly everything looked different. The aisles seemed taller. The store seemed larger. Every stranger looked unfamiliar. Panic set in.

He wasn't trying to run away. He wasn't rebelling. He simply drifted. One aisle. Then another. Until he realized he was lost.

Now imagine the other side of that story. Imagine his mom. Did she casually finish shopping? Did she compare prices for another fifteen minutes? Did she stop for coffee? Of course not. Everything changes.

Someone alerts an employee. An announcement is made over the loudspeaker. People begin looking down every aisle. Cashiers are watching the exits. Managers are searching the back rooms.

Complete strangers join the search. Why? Because the intensity of the search reveals the value of what has been lost.

Nobody organizes a search party for something they don't value. The search itself tells you how precious the missing person is. Now, we've all searched for things. A lost wedding ring. A missing wallet. A television remote that somehow disappears into another dimension every Saturday night. A family dog. A treasured photograph. A family heirloom. And every one of us knows this simple truth. **The intensity of the search tells you the value of what is lost.**

This weekend our nation has celebrated 250 years of God's providence and blessing. Across America there have been parades, fireworks, family reunions, cookouts, concerts, and neighborhood gatherings. We celebrate what we cherish. We gather around what we value. We throw parties because something is worth celebrating.

As Christians, we can thank God for His kindness throughout our nation's history. We can thank Him for freedoms that many throughout history have never known. We can remember those who sacrificed for those blessings while also recognizing that every good gift ultimately comes from the hand of God.

But this morning Jesus invites us to another celebration. One that has been happening far longer than 250 years. One that will continue long after every earthly kingdom has passed away. Luke 15 begins with another party and another search.

Jesus wants us to discover what heaven believes is worth searching for and what heaven believes is worth celebrating. Before we ever meet a shepherd, before we ever meet a woman with a lamp, before we ever hear about a lost son, Luke introduces us to several types of parties that are gathering in this chapter.

And honestly, the first one is not much of a party. But it sure is the most commonplace of them all.

I. The Complaint Party - (Luke 15:1-2)

"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 paints the scene with remarkable simplicity. Notice there are really two groups of people gathered around Jesus. On one side are the tax collectors and sinners. These are people everyone else had written off.

The tax collectors were viewed as traitors to their own people. Many had grown wealthy by collecting more taxes than Rome required. They were despised. Then Luke simply says, "*sinners.*"

That was the label religious society used for anyone whose life obviously failed to measure up. People with messy reputations. Broken lives. Questionable pasts. People whose failures were visible enough that everyone else knew about them. But notice something remarkable.

Luke says they were **drawing near to hear Him**. Isn't that beautiful? The very people religion pushed away, Jesus drew near. The very people others avoided wanted to hear Jesus speak. That ought to tell us something about our Savior.

There was something about His holiness that did not repel repentant sinners. It drew them. Not because He ignored their sin. Not because He excused their rebellion. But because they found in Him something they had never found anywhere else. Hope. Grace. Truth. Forgiveness.

Now on the other side stand the Pharisees and the scribes. They aren't drawing near. They're standing back. Watching. Evaluating. Critiquing.

Luke says, "*They grumbled.*" That word should sound familiar. Israel grumbled in the wilderness. The older brother will grumble later in this very chapter. Religious pride has always had a habit of grumbling when grace begins to flow.

Listen carefully to their accusation. "*This man receives sinners and eats with them.*" They intended that as an insult. Luke intends us to hear it as one of the greatest compliments ever spoken about Jesus. "This man receives sinners." Praise God He does.

If He didn't, none of us would be here this morning. Especially those who like to host the complaining parties. The complainers are the ones who have decided not to extend the same grace they have lapped up like starving dogs. The Pharisees had already decided who was worth their time. Who deserved God's attention. Who belonged. Who didn't.

Jesus answered differently. *"They're exactly who I've come for."* And here's something I don't want us to miss. Before Jesus ever tells a single parable, He is already living the parable.

His table fellowship **is** the sermon before the sermon. His meal with sinners **is** the illustration before the illustration. The shepherd is already searching before He ever tells us about a shepherd. A second party, The Search Party, has already begun. The Pharisees simply don't recognize it.

You see, the Complaint Party and the Search Party cannot occupy the same heart. One stands at a distance and criticizes. The other moves toward people in love. One counts failures. The other pursues people. One asks, *"Why would Jesus spend time with people like them?"* The other answers, *"Because that's where lost people are."*

Church, here's a sentence I hope you'll remember long after this morning: **Religion stands still and complains. Grace gets up and goes looking.** That's the difference.

Religion stands still and complains. Grace gets up and goes looking. The Pharisees stayed where they were. Jesus moved toward sinners. Religion builds walls. Grace builds tables. Religion protects its reputation. Grace pursues redemption.

And before we're too quick to criticize the Pharisees, we should ask whether we've ever hosted the same kind of party. Complaint Parties still happen. Sometimes they're held in church parking lots. Sometimes around kitchen tables. Sometimes in committee meetings. Sometimes in Sunday school classrooms. The conversations may sound different, but the spirit is remarkably familiar.

"We don't like the music." "The church is changing." "These young people scuff the floors." "Those new families don't do things the old way."

"I wish things were like they used to be." "We've never done it that way before." Preferences become priorities. Nostalgia becomes a virtue. Criticism becomes a pastime. Because the complaint party is never really a part of the life being lived in the orbit of the Savior. It is always off in some room, or in some side conversation in hallway, or shared over phone calls or text messages.

Meanwhile, there are lost people all around us. I sometimes wonder if one reason criticism grows so easily is because searching has grown so infrequently. Busy searchers seldom become professional grumblers.

The church was never called to host the Complaint Party. The church was invited to join the Search Party. And that's exactly where Jesus takes us next. Because instead of arguing with the Pharisees, He tells them two stories. One about a wandering sheep. The other about a silent coin. Both answer the same question.

What is worth searching for? And both reveal the astonishing heart of our King.

II. The Search Party - Luke 15:3–5, 8

So how does Jesus respond to the Complaint Party? He doesn't rebuke them. He doesn't call them names. He doesn't enter into a theological debate. He tells stories. One about a shepherd and a sheep. One about a woman and a coin. At first glance they seem like simple illustrations from everyday life. But they are doing something far deeper.

Jesus isn't simply teaching us about sheep or coins. He is revealing the very heart of God. Look at verse 4.

"What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it?"

Notice what Jesus assumes. He doesn't ask, *"Would anyone bother?"* He assumes every shepherd listening would. Of course he would search. Why? Because the sheep mattered. Not because it was the most impressive sheep. Not because it had earned special treatment.

Not because it was better than the others. Simply because it belonged to him. The search reveals the Shepherd's heart. Now think about sheep for a moment.

Sheep are not exactly known for their brilliance. A sheep rarely wakes up one morning and thinks, *"Today I'd like to become hopelessly lost."* It simply wanders. One patch of grass. Then another. Then another. Before long, home has disappeared behind the horizon. Isn't that often how sin works?

Very few people wake up planning to destroy their marriage. To ruin their family. To abandon Christ. To wreck their lives. It usually happens much more quietly than that. One compromise. One neglected prayer. One missed opportunity to gather with God's people. One secret sin. One excuse. One drifting decision after another. Until one day they look around and realize, "I'm farther from God than I ever intended to be."

No one drifts toward holiness. The current of this fallen world always pulls us away from Christ. The writer of Hebrews warns believers repeatedly not to drift. Why? Because drifting is subtle. It feels harmless. Until suddenly, you are lost.

But here's the problem. Once the sheep is lost it cannot simply find its way home. Sheep have no internal compass. They don't retrace their steps. They don't suddenly become wise. They simply panic. They bleat. They freeze. But they do not rescue themselves. They wait for someone else to come.

Church that is every one of us apart from the grace of God. The Bible never describes sinners as people who merely need better directions. It describes us as people who need rescue. We don't simply need advice. We need a Savior. But then Jesus immediately tells another story.

Verse 8. *"Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it?"*

Now the picture changes. The sheep wandered. The coin didn't. The sheep is alive. The coin isn't. The sheep at least knows it's in trouble. The coin doesn't even know it's lost. I love Tim Keller's observation here.

Jesus intentionally gives us two very different pictures of lostness. Some people wander. Others don't even realize they're lost. Some feel the weight of guilt. Others feel perfectly content without God. Some know something is missing. Others never stop long enough to ask.

The sheep is helpless. The coin is completely passive. Yet both require exactly the same thing. Someone must come looking. Grace always makes the first move. Religion says, "Find your way to God."

The Gospel says, "God has come looking for you." That is the difference. Religion offers directions. Grace begins a rescue. Perhaps you're here this morning and you've spent years trying to clean yourself up before coming to Christ. Trying to become worthy. Trying to become respectable. Trying to become religious enough. Friend, you will never rescue yourself.

The sheep cannot carry itself home. The coin cannot sweep itself into the woman's hand. Salvation has always begun with God. God seeking. God calling. God pursuing. God rescuing. That is why Jesus came.

Then I want you to notice what may be the most beautiful word in this entire passage. Verse 4. "**...until he finds it.**" Don't read past that too quickly. Until. The shepherd doesn't search for a little while. He doesn't search until supper. He doesn't search until it becomes inconvenient. He doesn't search until it starts raining. He searches until. That one little word tells us everything we need to know about the Shepherd.

He is relentless. Persistent. Determined. Patient. Loving. He will not stop because the terrain becomes difficult. He will not stop because darkness falls. He will not stop because searching is exhausting. He searches until.

The woman does exactly the same thing. She lights a lamp. She sweeps every corner. She searches carefully. She doesn't say, "I still have nine." She searches until.

Have you ever watched search-and-rescue teams after a child goes missing? They don't begin calculating overtime. They don't ask whether it's worth the effort. People from neighboring communities arrive. Dogs are brought in. Helicopters take to the air. Volunteers comb through woods and fields.

Why? Because someone precious is still missing. Love changes the equation. No loving parent has ever said, "It's getting expensive. Let's just go home." Love keeps searching.

Now church, don't miss where Jesus is going. This Shepherd isn't merely describing Himself. He is revealing Himself. He is the Shepherd. John chapter 10. *"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."* This parable doesn't merely anticipate Calvary. It points directly toward it.

The Shepherd searching the hills of Judea would one day climb another hill. Not carrying a sheep but carrying a cross. He searched until.

John tells us on the night before the crucifixion, *"Having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end."* (John 13:1) To the end. Until.

He didn't stop in Gethsemane. He didn't stop when they arrested Him. He didn't stop when they mocked Him. He didn't stop when they scourged Him. He didn't stop halfway up Golgotha. He loved us until.

Isaiah had seen this Shepherd centuries before. *"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way..."* There is the wandering sheep. Then Isaiah says, *"...and the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all."* The Shepherd takes the burden of the sheep.

Church, that's the Gospel. Not that lost sheep eventually become smart enough to find home. But that the Shepherd comes to them. Carries them. Bears their burden. Pays their debt. Brings them safely home. That's why I keep coming back to this simple sentence.

Religion stands still and complains. Grace gets up and goes looking. Religion says, "They should come here." Grace says, "We'll go there." Religion waits. Grace pursues. Religion points at the lost. Grace walks toward the lost. And praise God Jesus didn't merely tell this story. He lived it.

Because every one of us who belongs to Christ can say the same thing: **I wasn't looking for Him. He came looking for me.**

And when the Shepherd finally finds the sheep, when the woman finally finds the coin, What happens next? Do they lecture the sheep? Do they shame the coin? Do they quietly put everything back where it belongs and move on? Not at all. Something completely unexpected happens.

The Search Party becomes **the Celebration Party**.

III. The Celebration Party - Luke 15:6–10

One of the beautiful things about Jesus is that He refuses to leave His stories unfinished. The search always has a destination. The Shepherd does not spend all night searching just so he can say, *"Well...I found it."*

The woman doesn't finally locate the coin and simply whisper, *"There it is."* No. The search ends exactly where it was always intended to end. With joy. Look again at verses 5 and 6.

"And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.'"

Do you notice what Jesus doesn't say? The shepherd doesn't scold the sheep. He doesn't lecture it. He doesn't drag it home by a rope. He doesn't force it to walk behind him as punishment. Instead, he picks it up. He places it on his shoulders. And he carries it home.

That image would have been immediately recognizable to Jesus' audience. Shepherds often carried exhausted or injured sheep across their shoulders, securing the legs with their hands as they made the journey home.

The sheep contributes nothing to its rescue. It simply rests in the strength of the shepherd. What a picture of the gospel. Brothers and sisters, our salvation is not ultimately the story of our determination to hold onto Christ. It is the story of Christ holding onto us.

The Shepherd bears the weight. The Shepherd carries us home. The Shepherd rejoices all the way. Then Jesus says something even more surprising. The shepherd throws a party. He calls his friends. He calls his neighbors. "Come celebrate with me!"

Now if we're thinking like accountants, this doesn't make much sense. The party may cost more than the sheep was worth. The economics seem terrible. The Complaint Party is good about deciding what things are not worth celebrating.

But grace has never operated according to the world's accounting system. The celebration isn't about financial value. It's about relational value. The shepherd isn't celebrating recovered property. He's celebrating restored fellowship. The same thing happens with the woman.

Verse 9. *"And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.'"*

Again, another party. Another invitation. Another celebration. Jesus repeats Himself because He wants us to understand something. This is not merely how shepherds behave. This is how God feels.

Listen carefully to verses 7 and 10. *"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."*

Then again, *"There is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."* Now, notice something. Jesus doesn't actually say the angels are rejoicing. He says there is joy **before** the angels.

The picture is almost as though the angels are witnessing Someone else's joy. Whose joy? The Father's. The Son's. The triune God's delight in redeeming sinners. The angels certainly rejoice. But Jesus is drawing our attention to something even greater. The heart of God Himself.

Sometimes people picture God as reluctantly forgiving sinners. As though salvation is something He does because He has to. Luke 15 completely destroys that idea. God delights in saving sinners. He rejoices over repentance. He celebrates redemption. He doesn't merely tolerate repentant people. He welcomes them.

That is exactly what the Pharisees could not understand. Remember why Jesus told these stories in the first place.

"This man receives sinners and eats with them." Yes. And heaven couldn't be happier about it. The Complaint Party thought Jesus should avoid sinners. The Celebration Party reveals that heaven runs toward repentant sinners with joy. Church, let me ask you a question.

What makes us celebrate? That question reveals a great deal about our hearts. This weekend our nation has celebrated its 250th anniversary. Across our country there have been fireworks, concerts, family gatherings, and celebrations. And rightly so. It is appropriate for us to thank God for His providence. For His mercy. For the freedoms we have enjoyed.

For generations who sacrificed so that many blessings could be preserved. We celebrate because we cherish those gifts. But Jesus reminds us this morning that there is another celebration taking place.

America celebrates its birth. Heaven celebrates the new birth. America celebrates political liberty. Heaven celebrates spiritual freedom. America celebrates its history. Heaven celebrates eternity breaking into history every time another sinner is made alive in Christ.

One celebration is temporal. The other is eternal. One day, the fireworks will fade. The flags will be folded. The cookout leftovers will be put away. The anniversary banners will come down. But heaven's celebration never ends. Because every day another sinner repents. Another sheep is carried home. Another lost coin is found. Another prodigal begins the journey home. And heaven rejoices all over again.

Brothers and sisters **we celebrate what we cherish.** Think about that. A nation reveals what it values by what it celebrates. Families reveal what they value by what they celebrate. Businesses reveal what they value by what they celebrate. Churches reveal what they value by what they celebrate. Heaven reveals what it values by what it celebrates.

And what does heaven celebrate? Not impressive resumes. Not religious performance. Not denominational success. Not bigger buildings. Not larger budgets. Not polished programs. One sinner who repents. One life rescued by grace. One person brought safely home by the Shepherd. That becomes an important mirror for every church.

What excites us? What gets our attention? What fills us with joy? Do we become more animated over a remodeled room than a redeemed soul? More excited about attendance than repentance? More passionate about our preferences than our neighbors? If someone watched our conversations, what would they conclude we celebrate?

Because churches, just like individuals, become known for what they rejoice over. May we become known as a church that celebrates what heaven celebrates. Because when heaven throws a party the church should never refuse the invitation.

And yet there is still one more gathering Jesus intends to form. The Pharisees gathered to complain. Jesus gathered to search. Heaven gathered to celebrate. Now the question becomes **What kind of gathering will the church become?**

To be invited to the Celebration Party, we need to be a part of **The Sending Party.**

IV. The Sending Party

By now, Jesus has answered the Pharisees' complaint. Not with an argument. Not with a rebuke. But with a picture. Actually, three pictures. A shepherd. A woman. And from Father's Day, a father. Every one of them is revealing the same truth. **God delights in bringing lost people home.**

But here's the question. If that's what God delights in, what should His people delight in? If Jesus is forming a Search Party, and heaven is throwing a Celebration Party, what kind of church should we become?

I would suggest there is only one answer. **A Sending Party.** Because the Church does not merely admire the Shepherd. The Church joins the Shepherd. Jesus never intended Luke 15 to become merely a comforting chapter for Christians to read. He intended it to become the DNA of His people.

We are not simply people who have been found and sit in the same room together because we like the room. We are people who now join the search. Think about the rhythm of the Christian life.

The Complaint Party stays where it is. The Search Party goes. The Celebration Party rejoices. The Sending Party goes again. That is the rhythm of the Kingdom.

Gather. Go. Rejoice. Go again. It is the rhythm of the book of Acts. Jesus seeks. The Church seeks. The gospel advances. The Kingdom comes close. Every time God's people leave the comfort of the ninety-nine to pursue the one.

Now let me say something that I hope lands as an invitation rather than a rebuke. Every church eventually becomes known for the kind of party it hosts. Some churches become Complaint Parties. People gather around criticism. Preferences. Personalities. Traditions. Politics. Programs. Nostalgia. Because there is always something to complain about.

The music. The temperature. The carpet. The preacher. The teenagers. The children. The new people. The old people. The changes. The lack of change. If Satan cannot stop the mission of a church, he will gladly distract it. Because people busy criticizing the mission seldom participate in it.

I have often wondered if one reason criticism grows so easily is because searching has grown so infrequently. Busy searchers seldom become professional grumblers. Now hear me carefully.

This isn't a sermon against discernment. The Pharisees weren't wrong because they cared about holiness. They were wrong because they misunderstood holiness. They believed holiness meant staying away from sinners. Jesus showed them that true holiness runs toward sinners to bring them home. There is a world of difference.

Religion stands still and complains. Grace gets up and goes looking. Church, which sentence describes us? When people think about First Baptist Church, what kind of party comes to mind?

Do they picture a church protecting its preferences? Or pursuing its neighbors? Do they picture a church known for what it opposes? Or a church known for whom it loves in the name of Christ? Do they picture a church waiting for people to come through these doors?

Or a church joyfully going into the community because the Shepherd is still searching? That is the church I long for us to become.

Not because it is trendy. Not because it is strategic. Because it is biblical.

This weekend America has celebrated 250 years. Parades. Fireworks. Cookouts. Family gatherings. Communities celebrating together. Those are good gifts. Give thanks for them. Pray for our nation. Honor those who sacrificed. Teach your children to be grateful.

But remember every earthly celebration eventually ends. Tomorrow the last fireworks will fade. The grills will cool. The decorations will come down. The flags will be folded. The songs will end. But heaven's celebration never stops. Because somewhere another wandering sheep is still waiting to be found. Somewhere another lost coin is still hidden in the darkness. Somewhere another prodigal is still wondering whether the Father would receive them.

Somewhere in Martinsburg, a teenager is asking questions about life that no one knows. Somewhere in Inwood a widow sits alone. Somewhere in Hedgesville a young couple is watching their marriage slowly drift apart. Somewhere in Gerrardstown a coworker quietly carries guilt that has become almost unbearable. Somewhere in Berkeley County, a child has never heard the name of Jesus explained with clarity and love.

And church the Good Shepherd is still searching. The question is not whether Jesus has stopped His mission. The question is whether we will join Him. In just a few moments this service will end.

We'll pray. We'll sing. We'll greet one another. Then we'll walk through those doors. Don't think of yourself as simply leaving church.

Think of yourself as joining **The Search Party**.

Because somewhere this week Jesus intends to use one conversation. One invitation. One act of kindness. One shared meal. One gospel conversation. One prayer. One faithful witness. To bring another sheep home.

Church today you get to choose your party. You can attend the Complaint Party where people gather to criticize.

You can admire the Search Party without ever joining it. You can celebrate the Celebration Party from a comfortable distance. Or you can become part of the Sending Party, leaving this place to join the Good Shepherd in seeking those He came to save.

That is the party Jesus is hosting. And I pray it becomes the kind of church we are. Because the Church was never called to host the Complaint Party.

We were invited to join the Search Party, so heaven would have one more reason to throw another Celebration Party.

Let's pray.