

The Heart of God for the Lost

Luke 15:1-24

We are stepping into Luke 15 and let's go ahead and read the first two verses which set the stage for us...

Luke 15:1-2

1 Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. **2** And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them."

So Jesus is continuing to be sought out by people who have heard *of* him and perhaps have heard him, but they want to know more. And the context here is that in particular, people identified as "tax collectors" and "sinners" were the ones drawing closer and closer.

If you remember who these groups of people were, they were not considered to be the most admired of people, we could say. Tax collectors were viewed as traitors because they were working for Rome and would take extra for themselves. "Sinners" is just a catch-all term for anyone who would have been looked down upon by many in society. These were typically prostitutes, thieves, drunkards, and others.

And so they are drawing near, and it causes the Pharisees and the scribes, the religious leaders, to grumble. They murmured to themselves and to others concerning the lack of class and self-respect of Jesus because he allowed "those" people to not only talk with him, but to eat with him. The word there for "receives" can mean "welcome." Jesus not only indulged them, he welcomed them to the table and his fellowship.

Jesus, knowing the controversy and the heart issues of the Pharisees and scribes, answers them...

Luke 15:3

3 So he told them this parable:

Now, before we jump into the parable, it's important to note that in reality, there are three parables: the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin, and the parable of the lost son, otherwise known as the parable of the prodigal son.

So there are three parables but here Luke gives us the singular "parable," and he does that possibly because the three parables, though they each have unique features, all tell the same story. **The story that God seeks after the lost and all of heaven rejoices when they are found.**

It is the truth that the self-righteous, religious leaders needed to hear and it's the truth that we all need reminding of. God seeks after his lost children and there is unspeakable joy in heaven when they are found.

THE PARABLE OF THE LOST SHEEP

Luke 15:4-7

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? **5** And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. **6** 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.' **7** 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.

In our first parable we see the heart of God as our shepherd. And it's important to understand that the image of God as a shepherd was a familiar one for the people of Israel.¹

If you remember the beginning of probably the most famous Psalm, Psalm 23, David, who was a shepherd himself, writes...

Psalm 23:1

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

This image became a common picture of who God was for the Jewish people. So, when Israel did face times of trouble and need they would say...

Psalm, 80:1, 3

¹ The following progression of verses regarding the sheep and shepherds of Israel was taken from Ryken, *Luke*, vol. 2, 101-102.

1 Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock. You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth...**3** Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved!

And then this image was continued by the prophets of Israel...

Isaiah 40:11

He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.

Again, God was a good shepherd for His people, however, He had entrusted the care of His sheep to the spiritual leaders who were not always the good shepherds they were called to be.

Ezekiel 34:1-6

1 The word of the Lord came to me: **2** “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord God: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? **3** You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. **4** The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, **the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought**, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. **5** So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered; **6** they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them.

So, all of this to say, that when Jesus uses the image of a good shepherd who seeks out the lost sheep, the Pharisees and scribes there that day, would have seen this as a direct statement to their failure as shepherds of Israel. In other words, Jesus is saying, these people, that I am being criticized for associating with, need a shepherd but you have failed them. Instead of caring for them, instead of having compassion on them, instead of leading them, rather, you have mocked them, marginalized them, and looked down upon them with a heart of self-righteousness.

Again, this was an indictment on those grumbling about Jesus. But this is also a beautiful picture of the work of God in seeking out His sheep, flowing from the heart of God for us, sheep who have gone astray.

Catch that this parable (and the next one) shows us the divine initiative of God to go after the lost. The shepherd here is not waiting around for the sheep come back. It will not wander back to the flock, no, when he wanders he wandered away. The shepherd here goes after the sheep, leaving the rest of the flock presumably with a helping hand,

to find that one sheep who has wandered away. And when he finds it, puts the sheep on his shoulders, and carries it back to the flock rejoicing all the way and inviting others to rejoice with him when he returns.

Please understand, that God is not apathetic to those who are far from Him. He is not indifferent, uncaring, nonchalant, or uninterested. He seeks out and He pursues the lost. And notice it is not out of anger, or fueled by the desire to discipline or punish the sheep, but out of love and concern that the lost are brought back into the fold.

Again in Ezekiel, after confronting the leaders who failed to shepherd the people of Israel, God says...

Ezekiel 34:11-12

11 “For thus says the Lord God: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. **12** As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.

And this really is the story of Scripture. We won't turn there today but if you remember the account of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, they are tempted by the serpent, they fail to obey God's good command. Ashamed and afraid they hid from God. And the text says that God called out to them, “Where are you?” Of course, God knew right where they were, obviously no one can hide from God. But it is was a picture of the broken relationship between man and God, but it is also a picture of God's pursuit of fallen man. The rest of the story of Scripture is God saying, “Where are you?” as He seeks out and saves his lost sheep.

Ultimately it would mean sending Jesus in the flesh, to spend time with “sinners,” demonstrating the caring and compassionate heart of God for even the worst of the worst, and then going to the cross on their behalf, putting us on His shoulders so to speak, that we can be reconciled back to our Good Shepherd and His flock.

If you are Christian this morning, who has repented of their sin and turned in faith to Jesus, remember your story, how in your sin, your lostness, God sought you out and brought you back to Him. Don't forget the goodness of your Good Shepherd to not leave you wandering in the desert, but instead, moved towards you out of His own divine initiative.

Let's go on and look at the next parable...

THE PARABLE OF THE LOST COIN

Luke 15:8-10

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? **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.’ **10** Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

In this parable we see the heart of the Owner. In this story, a woman, we presume is poor, has lost a coin, in the Greek it is a drachma, which was equivalent to a Roman denarius, about a day’s wage. So again, by her own initiative seeks out the coin, finds it and rejoices.

We can imagine the drive to find something of great importance can’t we? Because we’ve all been there.

ILLUSTRATION - I remember a few years back, we were staying with some family friends who had a pool. One day I was swimming with my daughters and we were having a great time, until I realized, my wedding ring was no longer on my finger. If you’ve ever misplaced your wedding ring you know that feeling in the pit in your stomach. So, I told the girls we need to find this and so we swam all around the pool, looked all over the bottom of the pool, got out of the pool and looked all around the outside, we looked in the filter of the pool, and after at least a half hour, there was no sign of wedding ring. It was a terrible feeling. Dannielle, my wife, wasn’t there so I was thinking of how I would tell her I lost this incredibly valuable, not necessarily in terms of money, but emotionally valuable item she gave me at our wedding. Eventually we went inside, and sure enough, my ring was in the bedroom, but I could not remember ever taking it off. But the feeling of relief when I found it was incredible.

Again, we feel relief and joy when we find *something* that we consider valuable. How much more when we find *someone* who is lost. By God’s grace, I’ve never had to experience the fear and pain of one of my children missing. Perhaps someone here has. But I can only imagine the relief of finding a missing child or loved one.

In this parable, Jesus wants the religious leaders to recognize that though they have written off these people, don’t see them as having any worth or even any purpose in society, God sees them as incredibly valuable. Every person, regardless of past, regardless of sin issues, regardless of the brokenness in their life, is a person made in the image of God of measureless value and worthy of dignity. **And when we write them off, God does not.**

The heart of God is for the lost to be found, and no amount of “lostness” can change that. All people need a Savior, both those whose outward lives look clean and shiny but have dark hearts, and those whose outward lives look just as dark as their dark hearts.

So, let's be careful that in our hearts or minds we don't view some as important and valuable and others as less than.

Let's go ahead and look at the third parable, one that is probably very familiar to many: the parable of the lost Son or otherwise known as the parable of the prodigal Son...

THE PARABLE OF THE LOST SON

Luke 15:11-16

11 And he said, "There was a man who had two sons. **12** And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.' And he divided his property between them. **13** Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. **14** And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. **15** So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. **16** And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

Again, probably a familiar story to many, here Jesus talks about a son who is ready to leave. He is tired of his home, tired of his father and desires to be on his own. So he asks his Dad for an early inheritance. And consider how offensive this was. It is like saying, "Dad, I wish you were dead."

The Father reluctantly gives his son what is his, and he sells it off, takes the money and goes off to live an extravagant life. Eventually, he is out of money and decides to work rather than go home. And the only job he could find is to work on a foreign farm feeding pigs, so hungry that he was jealous of the pigs' trough.

And this is an important part of the story for the religious Pharisees to hear. A swine-herding slave to a Gentile is a threefold dishonor. In other words, the son in this story is not at rock bottom, he is lower than rock bottom in the eyes of the Pharisees.

Going on, verse 17...

Luke 15:17-24

17 "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! **18** I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. **19** I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'" **20** And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. **21** And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' **22** But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes

on his feet. **23** And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. **24** For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate.

We will stop right there today and finish the parable next week.

In the story, the son “came to himself” in other words, he came to his senses and realized the mess he was in so he decided at the very least I can be a hired hand at my father’s house and surely I will be treated better there. Of course he would, but he had no idea how much better.

He rehearses this speech to tell his father, but as he is nearing home, the Father sees him and runs to him. Another important part of this story because the idea of a grown man tying up his robe to run was considered foolish and undignified. But he runs to him, throws his arms around him, and kisses him.

The son begins to give his speech, but before he can get all the words out, his father gets the best robe he owns and puts it on him, puts a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet. The father tells his servant to prepare a feast in honor of his son who was lost but is now found. And there was a great celebration.

What a beautiful scene as we imagine that played out between a son and his father. But the truth is that is what we’ve experienced when we repent and turn in faith to Christ.

Again, repentance is turning away from our sin, coming to our senses so to speak, turning away from the mess we’ve found ourselves in, and turning to God in Christ. It is to say to him, I don’t deserve to be called your son because I recognize my sinfulness in light of your holiness. And though we come to God with our heads down, ashamed and fearful to make eye contact, we are met with the arms of the Father ready to embrace us and welcome us home. He clothes us with the robes of Jesus’ righteousness, puts a ring on our finger symbolizing sonship, and shoes on our feet which elevates our standing beyond mere servants to members of the family. The Father, and all of heaven, rejoices when we come home.

If you have never had that experience in your life, we would plea with you to come home to the Father. Whether you have haphazardly wandered away from the flock like a lost sheep, you feel helpless like a lost coin that cannot find itself, or you have lived a life of deliberate and willful rebellion against God, you can return to the Father today. **And if you do, please catch this because it is the point of the parables, you will be met with celebration and not condemnation.**

Again, these parables show us the heart of the Father who is a Good Shepherd. God is not reluctant to welcome sinful men and women back into relationship with Him. God

is not resistant to those who come to Him with humble, repentant faith. He was not unwilling to seek and to save the lost. You don't have to beg and plead with him trying to convince him to offer you his forgiveness. It is a joy for Him to do so.

So, if that is you today, the wandering sheep, the lost coin, or the prodigal son, come home to the embrace of the Father. Turn in faith to Christ today.

HAVING HEART LIKE OUR FATHER

But for the rest of us, those of us who have done that, this is a call for us to be on guard that we don't develop hearts like the Pharisees. We will talk more about that next week but today consider how we should cultivate our hearts to reflect the heart of our Father, hearts that motivate us to do a few things:

1. Move towards outsiders with love and the gospel.

Again, God took the initiative and made the steps necessary to reach us with the gospel. He stepped into our mess, taking on flesh, and bearing the weight of our sins on his shoulders at the cross. Though we could never do the same for anyone else, we can certainly move towards them in love and point them to the one who did. Evangelism and missions flowing from a heart of love for God and mankind is a primary way we reflect the heart of God Himself.

“We long to see men thus forgiven. We pine to bring the prodigal's head to the Father's bosom, the wandering sheep to the good Shepherd's shoulder, the lost piece of money to the Owner's hand. Until this is done, nothing is done. I mean nothing spiritually, nothing eternally, nothing that is worthy of the agony of the Christian's life, nothing that can be looked upon as deserving of an immortal spirit's spending its fires upon it. O Lord, our souls yearn to see Jesus rewarded by the salvation of the blood-bought! Help us to lead souls to Him.”
Spurgeon, *The Soulwinner*, 244-245

It is a sad state to consider yourself to be in right relationship with God and at the same time be apathetic to the fact that billions of others are not. If that is true, we aren't much different than the Pharisees.

Let's reflect the Father and move towards outsiders with love and the gospel.

Second, I'd say we should reflect the Father's heart by...

2. Never growing cold to seeing His grace lavished on others.

We should seek to keep our hearts tender and not hardened when we hear others' stories of God's work in their lives. Next week we plan to have baptisms and each time someone is baptized it is a public declaration of God's gracious work in their heart, that they were the lost sheep who was carried back to the flock on the shoulders of the shepherd. And so we rejoice as a church family because we know that all of heaven rejoiced as well.

But I think we should also remind ourselves of our own stories, taking time when we can to reflect on the way that God has been gracious to us in our own stories. Don't forget the grace of God shown in your own life.

ILLUSTRATION - I remember when I was in undergraduate Bible college, in one of my classes, each of us was asked to stand in front of the class and give our testimony. We were asked to tell the class about our journey to faith and how we ended up there at school. One by one, each student would get up and tell their story, but the guy who went right before me told an incredible story about being saved from a life of drugs and rebellion. God had radically changed his heart and now he wanted to serve the Lord in ministry. Then it was my turn, and when I went up there I said, "Well, my story isn't as dramatic as that one but..." and continued to tell my story. After that, the professor said, "Never think that your salvation story isn't as miraculous as someone else's. God saved you from your sins, you were dead but now you are alive. That is always a glorious work!"

And as we saw from these parables, not only is our salvation a glorious work, it is God's joy to do it. That is the kind of Father and Good Shepherd we have. Let's rejoice in our salvation and the salvation of others, because God does.

VERSES

Luke 15:1-2

Luke 15:3

Luke 15:4-7

Psalm 23:1

Psalm 80:1, 3

Isaiah 40:11

Ezekiel 34:1-6

Ezekiel 34:11-12

Luke 15:8-10

Luke 15:11-16

Luke 15:17-24

SERMON DISCUSSION GUIDE

Luke 15 contains some of the most beautiful and well known parables of Jesus' teaching. In a confrontation with the Pharisees, Jesus teaches us about God's heart for the lost by giving the Parable of the Lost Sheep, Parable of the Lost Coin, and the Parable of the Lost Son, also known as the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

Who might Christians consider to be the "tax collectors" and "sinners" of our day?

I. THE PARABLE OF THE LOST SHEEP - Luke 15:4-7

Read Psalm 23 and discuss the imagery David uses in describing God as a shepherd.

Looking back on your own journey to faith, how might you see the Lord's initiative in bringing you to faith in Him?

Are there any specific images in the parable that you find especially moving or encouraging?

II. THE PARABLE OF THE LOST COIN - Luke 15:8-10

Have you ever lost something of extreme value? How did you feel? Did you find it? How did you feel then?

What does this parable teach us about the value of even those who seem far from God?

Are there any specific images in the parable that you find especially moving or encouraging?

III. THE PARABLE OF THE LOST SON - Luke 15:11-16

How was the son different than the lost sheep and the lost coin?

How is the parable a picture of repentance?

What does this parable teach us about God's response to repentance? Is that how you think of God responding to repentance?

How should that shape the way we respond to other's attempts at reconciliation with us?

Are there any specific images in the parable that you find especially moving or encouraging?

Give a 1-2 sentence summary of the main lesson(s) of these three parables.