

GOD WITH US

Part 8: JESUS

Message 15 – The SEEKER: Jesus’ Heart for People

Luke 15

Introduction

One of the unique features of Luke’s gospel is what scholars call the “travelogue” found from Luke 9:51 – 19:27. At the beginning of this section, Jesus resolutely sets His face to go to Jerusalem for the final time. Then, he travels with His disciples through Samaria on the way to His destination, Jerusalem. At the end of the section, Jesus arrives and the “triumphal entry” takes place (the events of Palm Sunday). In this “travelogue” Luke has gathered many words and deeds of Jesus, many of which are *unique* to his gospel. Certain famous parables are only found in this section of Luke: The Good Samaritan (10:29-37); The Rich Fool (12:13-21); The Barren Fig Tree (13:6-9); The Seats at the Table (14:7-11); The Rejected Invitation (14:15-24); The 3 ‘Lost and Found’ Parables (ch.15); The Shrewd Steward (16:1-13); The Poor Man and Lazarus (16:19-31); The Persistent Widow (18:1-8); The Tax Collector and the Pharisee (18:9-14). Thus, Luke’s “travelogue” is a treasure of rich, unique teachings of Jesus as He makes His way to His final destination – Jerusalem and the cross.

Perhaps most significant of all in this unique collection of stories is the trilogy of ‘Lost and Found’ parables in ch.15. Here, the heart of Jesus (and the Father) is expressed in unmistakable pictures. This chapter is really a “Bible in miniature” for it captures the entire theme of the Bible – *God lost something, and He wants it back* – in a striking sequence of 3 short stories.

The Setting (15:1,2)

Now all the tax collectors and the sinners were coming near Him to listen to Him. Both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them” (15:1,2).

The Pharisees (“separate ones”) were grumbling because Jesus was showing too much kindness toward “sinners.” He was even eating with them, which to the Pharisees was a sign of intimate

friendship. Clearly, the Pharisees did not understand the heart of Jesus toward humanity or His purpose for coming into the world. Thus, these 3 parables are a challenge to the Pharisaic proud heart and narrow view of God's love for all people.

In the context of these 3 parables, Jesus had been sent initially to the Jewish community as a people. So, the sheep, coin and son parallel that the people were in the community and then became 'lost,' yet they 'repent' (turn back to God). Even the 'tax-collectors' and 'sinners' were Jewish. However, after Christ's ascension to heaven and the mission to the Gentiles was launched, these parables took on a broader implication for those who didn't know about God, or His Son Jesus. As 'the seeker,' God has been 'seeking and saving all of humanity' who turn toward Him and accept His Son's sacrifice for their sins. *"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that WHOEVER believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16).*

The Lost Sheep (15:3-7)

So He told them this parable, saying, "What man among you, if he has a hundred sheep and has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open pasture and go after the one which is lost until he finds it? 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 which was lost!' I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."

The one lost sheep is of such great value to the shepherd that he will leave the 99 *in the open pasture* and go in search of the lost one. The open pasture may signal the urgency in the shepherd's heart, since he did not take the time to safely shelter the 99 in an enclosure. Jesus' point is made in the final line: Heaven has more joy over one lost sinner who is brought back into the fold than over the 99 who never wandered away. This begs the question: *Why are the Pharisees grumbling about sinners coming close to Jesus when heaven is celebrating???*

Have you ever become 'lost' while following your map or GPS, thinking you were heading in the right direction to your destination? Or, perhaps you were following someone driving in front of you and they made it through the green traffic light and you didn't. Unfortunately, they didn't realize that you were still stopped at the red light and they kept driving out of sight! Like this sheep in the parable, sometimes we don't even know that we are truly lost until we are SO lost. It takes a 'search and rescue' effort to find us. The heart of the shepherd knew that the sheep didn't stubbornly choose to get stranded away from the flock, but rather it had wandered off the path without even realizing it. So it is with us. We might not even know that we are lost! It takes a gentle touch of a friend or some other person, to let us know that we are from God's perspective - 'lost'. We need a guide to show us the way back to Jesus who said that He is 'THE way' (Jn 14:6).

The Lost Coin (15:8-10)

“Or what woman, if she has ten silver coins and loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin which I had lost!’ In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

There is balance in this first pair of 'twin' parables. The first involved a man, the second a woman. Here, the woman has lost 1 of 10 very valuable coins. The suggestion of scholars is that these 10 coins were her dowry coins, given to her at her wedding. In the time of Jesus, women would often wear these ten coins on their forehead. The fact that she lost 1 of these 10 coins would have been very disgraceful to the woman. This explains why she searched the entire house so carefully to find the 1 lost coin. Again, a party of rejoicing followed the recovery of the lost coin (reflecting the rejoicing in heaven over 1 person who comes back to God).

She could have neglected to check the chain's strength every so often to make sure the coins were secure, or had her chain get caught on something, ripping the coin off by accident. However she lost it, she knew she could not rest until she found it again. Some people realize something is missing in their lives. Perhaps

they have been searching for satisfaction, or success, or the right job or person, but nothing quite fills that place in their heart. In her case she knew what had been lost, but with others there is a sense of unrest until finally finding out that it is God who is missing in their lives. There is great joy upon being united with the lover of their soul through believing in Christ, and there is great rejoicing on earth and in heaven!

We can easily judge the Pharisees for failing to express God's joy like the angels do, over the return of lost sinners to God. But let's be a bit self-critical here. Does not the Christian church often show disdain for the different types of people who have strayed far from His home, far from His heart, and far from His plans for their lives? Often, the Christian community shows more concern for protecting the 99 from the bad influence of the lost, rather than taking risks to go out and find the 1 lost sheep. Obviously, there needs to be discernment exercised when befriending those who don't know Jesus yet. Having strength in your convictions does matter. Think about it. In what ways do you see the Christian community, today, being a lot like the Pharisees in Jesus' day? Or, how do you see the Christian community embodying the love of God for all people?

The Lost Son (15:11-32)

The monumental parable of “the prodigal son” completes Luke’s collection of ‘Lost and Found’ stories. While the two previous parables combine neatly to communicate the basic message (finding lost sinners is of utmost importance to God), this final parable brings out the details in the hearts of the various characters like no other story in Scripture. While it is commonly known as “the parable of the prodigal son,” it is more aptly entitled, “the parable of the father’s heart.”

The Younger Son Leaves Home (15:11-13)

And He said, “A man had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.’ So he divided his wealth between them. And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living.

In that culture, a son was only granted his inheritance after his

father had died. Thus, the younger son was greatly shaming his father by demanding his inheritance early. He was saying in effect: ‘Father, you are dead to me!’ It is significant that the father gave the son what he wanted. He divided his inheritance between the two sons, perhaps indicating the fact that God gives us a will and He allows us to exercise our will even in ways that dishonor Him. The younger son promptly moved to a far off country and squandered his inheritance.

God the Father has given us a free will. He does not try to “control” us. He allows us to exercise our will, even in directions that are opposite to His heart for us. He even allows us to act and live in ways that say, essentially: “Father, you are dead to me!” And, He allows us to experience the full impact of our own choices, even when that means spending years squandering our time, talents and treasures in ways that dishonor Him and disable us. Yet, all the while, He loves us and waits for us to turn our hearts back toward home as we remember, or learn of His gracious love. Are you wandering from the Father’s heart right now? Are you experiencing hardships and losses that seem unexplainable? Perhaps He is beckoning you to come to Him again, and to find rest in His love and His plans for your life.

The Younger Son Decides to Return Home (15:14-20)

“Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be impoverished. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he would have gladly filled his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, and no one was giving anything to him. But when he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men.”’ So he got up and came to his father.

The younger son’s “good time” soon ended, and he found himself destitute. First, the son tried to ‘fix’ his life his own way, which resulted in taking a job feeding pigs. Feeding pigs would have been an abhorrent task to a Jewish person, for whom pigs were “unclean animals.” But, he was desperate and not looking toward

God at this point. The son finally “came to his senses” after more time elapsed, and realized the compassion, love and respect that *his father* showed to even his hired men. Thus, he turned his heart and his feet in the direction of the father’s house.

So many of us have to learn lessons “the hard way.” We find within us this urge to explore “the far off country” with all of its values and agendas. We may even find success and fulfillment in the far off country for a while. But eventually we will feel a sense that something is lacking, something is ‘off.’ We could be at various levels of feeling broken and desperate. It is in those moments of “coming to our senses” that we need to grasp the central truth of the Bible: There IS a God-shaped hole in the heart of every person, and ONLY God can fill that hole. When we realize that our true life is found “at home with the Father,” we must run to Him in confidence of His love, as the One who has already borne our sin and our shame, to find forgiveness and restoration in His arms. God is always waiting for us. He will never turn away anyone who turns their heart towards Him.

The Father Welcomes the Younger Son Home (15:20-24)

But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found.’ And they began to celebrate.

“While he was still a long way off, his father saw him . . .”. What a poignant touch in Jesus’ parable. Was the father out looking for the son? Did he have his emissaries out searching for him? One way or another, the father saw him and felt compassion for him when he was still a long way off. The heart of God surely shines here. He is “the hound of heaven,” always chasing us down!

Men of his stature in that culture rarely “ran.” But this father “ran” when he saw his son from a distance. He also “kissed him.” The Greek tense is significant, for it could be translated: “*He kissed him and kissed him and kissed him.*” This father *made a scene*

over the return of his long-lost son. And he was not ashamed to look like a crazy man in showering love on his son!

The father did not allow the son to fully complete his prepared speech of remorse. The father cut him off, almost as if he did not need to hear it. He then called for the robe, the ring and the sandals, which were standing in wait for the son's return. The ring, in that day, was significant as a symbol of dignity and of belonging to the father's household. The family crest may have been on that ring. The fattened calf had been prepared for a great feast. It is clear that no matter how far off this son drifted, and no matter how long he was gone, *the father's heart never stopped hoping for the day of his return.*

I don't think there is any other passage in the Bible that more graphically portrays the heart of God the Father for lost human beings. What adjectives can we use to describe this Father? Passionate. Hopeful. Searching. Compassionate. Restoring. Rejoicing. Selfless. Reckless LOVE. Pastor Timothy Keller rightly calls this the parable of the "Prodigal God." The word "prodigal" has two meanings. It can mean "wasteful;" but it can also mean "extravagant." The God pictured in this parable is truly "extravagant" in the love He poured out on the lost son. Our God truly is a "Prodigal God!" Can you thank Him today for His prodigal, extravagant, reckless love toward You? Can you respond in some small way by loving Him back?

The Older Brother is Indignant (15:25-30)

"Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things could be. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound.' But he became angry and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began pleading with him. But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a young goat, so that I might celebrate with my friends; but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him.'

The Pharisees could not have missed the obvious fact that Jesus

was picturing them in his description of the older brother. The older brother was the “good guy” who tried to keep all the rules and “stay close to home.” The older brother felt that he deserved to be rewarded for being good and following the rules. Yet, as close as he was to home, *he was as far from the father’s heart as his younger brother was!* Notice the careful language Jesus used in this parable. The older brother calls the younger brother, “*this son of yours.*” He had disowned the younger brother!

It is possible to be as far from the Father’s heart while “staying close to home” as it is while “straying far from home.” In other words, “religious people” can be as “lost” as irreligious people! The problem is that while irreligious people typically recognize where they stand, the religious-lost person typically does NOT realize how far away from the heart of God they are. This was the issue for the Pharisees in Jesus’ day. They thought they were honoring God; but in fact, they were far away from the Father’s heart. See the parable of the tax-collector and the Pharisee in Luke 18. Only the tax-collector went home “right with God!”

But there is something deeper we must not miss about the older brother. In that day, the older brother was responsible for the management of the father’s estate and his affairs. It would have been the older brother’s responsibility *to go in search of the lost younger brother on behalf of the father.* Yet, he refused to do so. Instead of searching for his lost brother, he disowned him (just like the Pharisees were ‘disowning’ the tax-collectors and sinners. Jesus took on the role of the “true older brother” by going in the Father’s name to search for the Father’s lost children! Jesus was doing what the Pharisees should have done – act like a true older brother.

The Father Pleads with the Older Brother (15:31-32)

And he said to him, ‘Son, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found.’”

The parable ends without a resolution. The question is left hanging in the air: *Did the older brother change his mind/heart and go in to the party to celebrate the return of his lost brother?* We are left hanging with the hope that the older brother softened his heart and

wanted a relationship with his brother. This parable needs no resolution, for it is a challenge: A challenge to the self-righteous Pharisees; a challenge of their view (disdain) of tax collectors and sinners and of Jesus for associating with them. Would they learn from Jesus and begin to exude the heart of God the Father for wayward humanity? Would they go out in search of the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son?

****It is important understand that the Bible teaches that every human being is 'lost' from God's point of reference. Had we been able to find our way back to God through correcting our own standing with a Holy God, He would not have wasted the mission of His Son. Jesus lived as one of us, yet without sin, coming to be our substitute and bear the penalty of sin which is separation from God, and invite us to accept Him. The more we understand that we were truly lost and have been found, the more we will have compassion toward others who are lost like we would still be without God's love touching us. Jesus said that 'we must humble ourselves like little children' admitting that we are lost, in need of being found. Then we must join His search and rescue mission to help bring others to Him.**

The mission of Jesus has been rightly summarized in Luke 19:10, "For the Son of Man has come to seek and save that which was lost." If this is the heart of Jesus, and if Jesus is the Head of the Church, then it follows that the Church (the "body of Christ") should be deeply occupied with seeking and saving the lost. In other words, caring for anyone who doesn't know Christ and His love for them yet. This is why OUTREACH is (and always will be) at the heart of Oak Pointe Church. We need to be out on the road looking for another prodigal son or daughter of God who is trying to find their way back home. We need to run to them and embrace them with open arms and God's extravagant love. OPC needs to be a "prodigal church!" (Reckless in our love toward those who are still far from God.)

Discussion Questions

1. Which one of these parables do you identify with? How have you personally experienced Jesus as 'The Seeker'? Where do you see yourself in the journey of being lost, being found, helping others find Jesus and forgiveness?

2. How do you see the attitude of the Pharisees being expressed by Christians today? How about in your own heart?
3. What impact do these 3 parables have on your thinking about your love/compassion toward those who are “far from God?”
4. What do you love the most about the Father’s heart in the 3rd parable? Have you personally experienced God’s heart like that?
5. How can you embody that spirit of a “true elder brother” in your sphere of influence today?