

Sermon File # 604

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Jesus and the Lost

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to the 15th Chapter of Luke's Gospel, one of the most loved chapters in all of Scripture.

Although he was the sinless Son of God, Jesus had an amazing attraction for the outcasts and those rejected by the religious legalists, who called these outsiders and outcasts "sinners." The religious legalists, critics and sworn enemies of Jesus were appalled that he could claim to be the Son of God and yet associate with these "sinners," who were deemed unworthy of temple worship or even informal association. Jesus was given the moniker "friend of 'sinners'" (Matthew 11:19). What was intended to be an accusation and insult was a gracious tribute to our Savior, Jesus, who had come to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10).

Jesus not only associated with these "sinners," what *The Message* calls "men and women of doubtful reputation" (verse 1), but he also was possibly hosting them as his guests for table fellowship (verse 2). Kenneth Bailey points out that

table fellowship was and is in the Middle East a serious matter. For a supposed rabbi to invite to meal a group of outsiders and outcasts would have “offended the cultural sensibilities of the noble class, especially the Pharisees. To invite someone to a meal was the equivalent of saying “I include you in my social circle and accept you as an equal” (See Bailey’s *Poet and Peasant* and *Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary and Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke*, pages 142-143).

On his journey to the cross Jesus was encountering mounting hostility and also was revealing more of the heart of the Father, who had sent him on a mission to seek after the lost. Jesus gives these parables to show us deeply into the heart of God, the God who seeks and saves sinners through the death of his Son on the cross. These first two parables in verses 1-10 are seen as a double parable and need to be considered as a single unit (Bailey, above citation, page 142), giving us a picture of “God’s Search and Rescue Mission.”

Follow as I read **Luke 15:1-10**.

We all know what it’s like to lose something valuable. The older I get the more forgetful I get and so the search for something lost becomes a frequent part of my life, such as lost keys, wallets and other items that are not easily replaced. Losing things can be distressing and finding them can be occasions of relief and even celebration. Of course the more valuable the lost item the greater the distress; and the greater the joy and celebration when the lost item or missing person is found. What greater distress than to have a child who is lost, possibly abducted? And what greater joy than to find a child unharmed?

We can only imagine the fear in the hearts of family members of the 300 and some young school girls recently abducted by the radical Islamist group Boko Haram, which now threatens to sell these young girls into slavery. And we grieve for the family members of the over 300 victims of the sunken ferry disaster in South Korea. There is basically now no hope that any will be found alive. And the long search continues for the wreckage of the Air Malaysia Flight 370, whose crew and passengers likely perished in the Indian Ocean.

These tragedies represent grave danger or absolute hopelessness for those who are lost. The attention of the world has been drawn to these who are lost and the young Nigerian girls still with hope of rescue. But Jesus, the eternal Son of God, came into the world on a much greater, more profound rescue mission, to seek and to save those who are lost in sin and in desperate need of God’s gift of Kingdom life (Luke 19:10).

When Jesus was accused of welcoming and eating with those whom the self-righteous called “sinners,” that is, those of “doubtful reputation,” he effectively replied by saying this is what God is like. Jesus the Son of God came to show us what God is like and so in response to this criticism of his being a friend of

sinners Jesus says, in effect, “You are getting my point.” God is a sinner-seeking and welcoming God who sent his Son on a rescue mission and he continues his search and rescue mission even today.

Jesus tells these double parables, which characterize God, first of all in...

His regard for the lost

The witness of Scripture is clear that God’s love is universal and unconditional. Yet his love is received and experienced only by those who are aware of their need. Even God doesn’t force his love and grace upon those who resist him. And so Jesus made a clear distinction between the spiritually lost and sick he had come to save and to heal and those who refused to recognize their lostness, their sickness and their spiritual blindness (Luke 19:10; John 9:35-41). Jesus had a special attraction to and regard for the lost because he understood...

The condition of the lost

Jesus gave these parables to communicate the condition of the lost. In fact, his critics were more lost than they knew and were resisting the efforts of God to draw them into his saving love. The religious leaders and critics of Jesus failed to see themselves also as sinners in desperate need of God’s saving mercy.

The first picture is of a sheep that wanders from the fold and becomes lost to the shepherd-owner of the sheep. The picture of lostness that Jesus gives us is of heedlessness, helplessness and hopelessness.

In our first church, a congregation of rural people in Southern Indiana, one of our members owned some sheep. He described to me what unintelligent creatures they are and how they are apt illustrations of sinners who move away from God. Sheep are heedlessly consumed with one thing—getting to the next patch of grass. And they will drift away and often into danger, away from the shepherd’s protection. How easily do we sinners become preoccupied with the immediate and lose sight of our spiritual needs and drift into a life that endangers our soul’s eternal wellbeing. The prophet expressed well our tendency to wander heedlessly astray:

“We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
Each of us has turned to our own way” (Isaiah 53:6a).

A sheep is a helpless creature, unable to defend itself against wild predators and also unable to deliver itself from lostness, unable to find its way home to the safety of the fold. So in our lost-ness, we like sheep are heedless and helpless, and Paul would add, hopeless. Describing how that in our pre-conversion state we were dead in our transgressions and sins, Paul says also that when we were

separated from Christ in our lostness we were “without hope and without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:1, 12).

To add emphasis to this picture of hopelessness, Jesus tells the story of the peasant woman who lost a coin, worth about a day’s crucial wage and having also sentimental value as perhaps a part of a bridal headdress or necklace. Being a typical house in this place and period, there were no windows and the floor was dirt, covered with a straw mat. The task facing the woman was like “finding a needle in a haystack” (See William Barclay, *Luke*, DSBS). So, both the sheep and the coin were hopelessly lost apart from the seeking of the shepherd and the woman.

But more important than the sheep or the coin is the shepherd and the woman, and Jesus teaches first...

The compassion of the Shepherd

When Jesus told this story about the owner-shepherd leaving the fold (of the 99 sheep, no doubt in the care of another shepherd) to seek the lost sheep, he was referring to himself and to his mission. His seeking after the lost sheep was reflective of the heart of God, who yearns to draw his lost ones to himself. In Old Testament passages we read of God as the shepherd (most famously in Isaiah 40:11 and Psalm 23). And Jesus referred to himself as the Good Shepherd, the one who not only risks his life for the sheep, like a good earthly shepherd, but the one who lays down his life knowingly for the sheep (John 10:11). Hebrews refers to Christ as the Great Shepherd (13:20) and in 1 Peter we read that he is the Chief Shepherd of the sheep (5:4).

As Kenneth Bailey says, shepherding to the Jewish religious aristocracy was “a proscribed trade.” Although these religious leaders and scholars recognized that the Scriptures referred to God as the shepherd and also called for the leaders of the people to be good shepherds of the nation of Israel, they somehow spiritualized this concept. God could be a good shepherd, but to them, ironically, real earthly shepherds were despised and could not be included as religious leaders. Thus, when Jesus told this parable to these religious leaders and implied that a caring person would seek the lost like a shepherd, he was attacking their cultural sensibilities and prejudices (See Bailey, pages 143-147, above citation).

Jesus was saying that God the Son is a God who seeks the lost, though he is despised by the high and mighty. Jesus is the shepherd who stooped to make us great, as the Psalmist says (18:35). He emptied himself of glory and suffered shame and humiliating suffering and a horrible death on the cross for us (Philippians 2:6-8; Hebrews 12:2).

Jesus also attacked the cultural sensibilities of the religious leaders by telling the co-parable of the woman and the lost coin. Luke often featured women in his Gospel and Book of Acts, showing his respect for the role of women in Jesus' ministry and in the beginning of the church. He balanced the featuring of men and women in his gospel account (See Robert H Stein, *Luke: an Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, NAC, page 404). This featuring the role of a woman as a model seeker after the lost also must have offended these leaders, who had little regard for the role of women in institutional Judaism.

But Jesus could well have been alluding to the role of the church, as will be seen in Acts, in seeking the lost. Some scholars think that there is a Trinitarian allusion in Luke 15, showing the role of God the Son (shepherd); the Holy Spirit (the woman); and God the Father (father of the prodigal and elder sons), although this is only conjecture (See, for example, Michael Wilcock, *Savior of the World: The Message of Luke* for his comments on the parable of the woman and the coin). And certainly the church, the Bride of Christ, whether this is the correct interpretation of this parable or not, is to demonstrate and replicate the compassion of Christ in seeking after the lost (See G C Morgan, pages 151ff, vol. II, *The Westminster Pulpit*).

And our seeking God has regard for...

Those he has created and chosen

The parables Jesus tells in Luke 15 are vivid portrayals of our worth in God's sight. Jesus was rebuking the religious leaders for their minimalist and even contemptuous view of those they regarded as outcasts of doubtful reputation, the "sinners." Jesus is saying that these outcasts and outsiders to the established religious institutions were objects of God's electing love and saving grace. For that reason he, the Good Shepherd, was on a relentless pursuit of them, to bring them into the fold of the kingdom.

The lost sheep, representative of every one of us, is known to God and we have been known to him since before the creation of the world (Jeremiah 1:5; Ephesians 1:4). We are of great worth in his sight, just as the lost coin was of great worth in the sight of the woman. Peter ventures to place a value on us when he writes that we are worth more than silver or gold. In fact, we are worth "the precious blood of Christ" (1 Peter 1:18-19).

In these parables in Chapter 15, Jesus is perhaps showing an exponentially progressive "how much more" portrayal of the supreme value of a lost soul. The lost sheep is one out of a hundred sheep; the coin, one out of a necklace or headdress of ten coins; the prodigal son—one of two sons (This idea is suggested by Joel B Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT, page 573).

Perhaps the most important concept we can have of God is his amazing and unconditional love for us, wherever we are spiritually or morally or in regard to our faith or our unbelief. And we cannot fathom or explain why he would choose us for his electing grace. But those of us who are in Christ know that we did not take the first step and the only way we came to faith was by his relentless and effectual calling of us to himself. In the mysterious plan of God, we were in his heart even before we wandered off from his fold. Jesus knew you and me when he spoke these words:

“I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd” (John 10:16).

Jesus shows through these pictures the character of God through...

His rescue and recovery of the lost

Jesus gives a picture of a God who searches in order to rescue his lost sheep and the Spirit of God, working through his church, to find the lost coin. London pastor G Campbell Morgan says that the woman not only represents the church but also “the feminine side of God.” God is spoken of in masculine terms and the Bible speaks of God primarily as Father. Yet also the Bible uses feminine analogies to show God’s feminine and “motherly” side. He gently nurtures and cares for his children as the best mother does hers (e.g., Isaiah 49:15; 66:13). The shepherd and the woman seek after the lost...

With passion and purpose

The shepherd pursues the lost sheep with passion and purpose and the woman also seeks the lost coin with determination. The shepherd, in fact, makes his search with risk, perhaps to encounter wild animals that could have devoured the lost sheep. As Jesus told this parable, he knew that his destiny was his passion and death on the cross.

This past summer, 19 firefighters, members of a special “hotshot” team from Prescott, Arizona, lost their lives in a gallant effort to contain a massive wildfire. Almost daily we read of rescue efforts and about those who risk and even give their lives to rescue others, people they don’t even know.

Christ Jesus, the eternal Son of God, entered the world knowing that he would have to give his life, not just risk it, for you and me. In his humanity, Jesus dreaded his ineffable suffering and death for us, yet he surrendered to the will of the Father for the cross. In times when we are tempted to doubt the love of God, we need only to look at the cross, which was the price God paid to rescue us

from sin and death. The purpose of the cross was to pay the penalty for our sin and to make possible our forgiveness and peace with God.

Often I have prayed for more compassion for the lost, but lately I have come to understand that all I need is more of the heart of Jesus. If my heart is lost in his, if I become more like him, I will have compassion and a passion to seek the lost and do so...

With persistence

The shepherd looks for the sheep until he finds it (verse 4) and the woman sweeps and scours the house until she finds her lost coin (verse 8). Jesus will not be frustrated in his search for his lost ones. And the church, when it is led by the Holy Spirit in joining in Jesus' rescue mission, also will not be deterred. Evangelism these days seems difficult and slow work, but if Jesus is still seeking the lost, and I believe he is, then we must discover how to join him and as we do we will persevere.

If this second parable, about the woman seeking the coin, is a reference to the Holy Spirit working through the church, the bride of Christ (and I think it is), then we are to realize that we are at work with Christ himself in us. He knows where are the lost who can be reached. Our task is to prayerfully join him. Jesus never gives up. He will always succeed in his search. And that should cause us to take heart.

The story of Francis Thompson is one of God's relentless pursuit of one of his lost sheep. Young Thompson, in an attempt to gratify his father's ambitions, "embarked on a medical career—and failed to pass his final examinations. Seeking refuge from reproach, he lived a life of obscurity in London, at first selling books and later working for the book trade. Failing in both of these enterprises he enlisted as a soldier, but was discharged for incompetence. Thereafter he lived in the lowest conceivable kind of poverty, selling matches in the daytime and sleeping on the Thames Embankment at night. By now he was in poor health and addicted to (opium). He tried writing. His first brief compositions eventually found an editor in Wilfred Meynell, husband of the poet Alice Meynell. The Meynells, impressed by the merit of the fragments, were able to locate their author only after much difficulty. Shocked when they first saw him—emaciated and in rags—they restored him to health and helped him find religious faith.

"The Hound of Heaven," which Coventry Patmore declared "one of the very few great odes the language can boast," has been more widely read than any other religious poem of the century. It is the story of a man running from God."

Francis Thompson describes the persistence of God as the pursuit and persistence of a hound, in fact, the Hound of Heaven:

The Hound of Heaven

(He retreats within himself:)

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him...

* * *

*(But the fleeting soul knew that there was no ultimate
escape from those strong Feet that followed:)*

But with unhurrying chase,
And unperturbéd pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
They beat—and a Voice beat
More instant than the Feet—
“All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.”

* * *

That voice is round me like a bursting sea...
“Lo, all things fly thee, for thou flyest Me!
Strange, piteous, futile thing!

* * *

“Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest,
I am He Whom thou seekest!
Thou dravest love from thee, who dravest Me.”

Francis Thompson (1859-1907)

(from The Handbook of Preaching Resources, pages 77-78).

Christ the Shepherd will pursue his chosen until we are all gathered in (See John 17:12; 18:9). This is his work, in our lives and in the lives of others. Thus, evangelism is simply walking with the Good Shepherd as he seeks after his lost. It is being part of the work of the Holy Spirit as we participate with the bride of Christ, the woman, as she seeks the lost.

And in God's search and rescue mission he rescues...

With power to recover the lost

When the shepherd finds the lost sheep, his work is not over. Because a lost sheep is basically paralyzed and will not follow the shepherd, the shepherd has to carry the stubborn and frightened sheep on his shoulders. Thus the work of recovery is as difficult as the search itself, with a long journey ahead (See Bailey, page 148, above citation). And so we understand that salvation is not a one-time event that begins and ends with a profession of faith. Rather, salvation is a long process, even a lifetime of God's patient carrying of us all the way home.

Regardless of how long we have been followers of Christ, we never outgrow our total dependence on the Shepherd to carry us to complete restoration and a completed salvation. “Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him” (Hebrews 7:25).

Also in the parable of the woman and the lost coin we see the difficult work of recovering the lost. To find the coin the woman needed a lamp in the dark, windowless house. We depend on the word of God as a lamp to our feet and a light before our path (Psalm 119:105) and the Holy Spirit directs us, even in our methods of witness and evangelism through relationship-building and hospitality. It’s instructive to me that the parable says the woman swept the house, but doesn’t mention the broom or whatever instrument she used. Likewise, we are not to glorify the methods of reaching the lost. We are simply to use the opportunities that the Holy Spirit places before us. And certainly the word of God, preached on the Lord’s Day, is a means the Holy Spirit uses to seek out the lost. But also we are to share the word in the daily marketplaces where our lives might intersect with the lost. In all of this work, we depend absolutely on the Holy Spirit and the Good Shepherd to empower this rescue of the lost.

Madeleine McCann, a 3-year-old girl from Scotland, disappeared from a holiday villa in a Portuguese resort on May 3, 2007. I recall the intense effort in Portugal and Western Europe by the police and the general public in searching for little Madeleine during the subsequent weeks and months after her abduction. Her parents, Gerry and Kate, have spearheaded a worldwide hunt for their daughter, now aged 9, refusing to give up hope of her safe return.

And with God, no situation is hopeless. There is always hope for God’s lost children, that they will be found and that we will be recovered and restored to a right relationship with God and others. There is hope that we will become the healthy, God-centered and joyful children the Father has created and called us to be.

Perhaps the most revolutionary characteristic of God that Jesus gives in these parables is...

His rejoicing over the restoration of the lost

Jesus continues to offend his religious critics by saying that not only does God seek and save the lost outsiders, those considered of ill repute and of little worth to society; he actually rejoices over their being found and brought home (verses 5-7, 9-10).

“Rejoicing in heaven” and “rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God” is actually a circumlocution that expresses the joy of God himself (See Robert H Stein, page 404, above citation). By contrast, the Orthodox Jews said, “There is

joy in heaven over one sinner who is obliterated before God” (William Barclay, above citation).

The rejoicing in heaven is the joy of our being...

Restored to God

God rejoices that we who are rescued and brought home are restored to a relationship with him as our loving Father. Our lives would be transformed if we could come to grips with this fundamental reality: we are God’s beloved children. Whatever we have done is irrelevant to the way God loves us. The lost sheep did nothing to contribute to his recovery, no more than the inanimate lost coin. Even the prodigal son (verses 11ff) was restored, even though he returned to the Father with less than noble motives. God’s love for us is unconditional as is his restoration of us. God simply delights, actually is overjoyed, by our restoration to his side.

Twenty-seven years ago, a newborn sick with fever was snatched from a New York City hospital, her frantic mother returning to the emergency room to find an empty crib. On a Wednesday in 2011, police reported that the baby, now a woman, had been found. She reached out to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children because she suspected that the people raising her were not her real family.

Carlina White was just 19 days old when she disappeared from Harlem Hospital in August of 1987. Police searched for kidnappers but never found enough evidence to charge any suspects. Her mother, Joy White, always had a feeling that her baby was alive, her family said.

“I never gave up looking for her,” she told the New York Post.

http://www.today.com/id/41163230/ns/today-today_news/t/kidnapped-girl-finds-her-own-mom-after-years/#.Ugv3Kdl3tCg

But no human joy can compare with the joy of the Father in finding us and restoring us to his eternal love. This restoration was the motive behind the cross.

There is heavenly joy over the lost being...

Restored to the fold of God

The recovered sheep is restored to the sheepfold and the found coin is restored to the necklace of the woman. And our calling as God’s fold and the bride of Christ is to receive the recovered lost and restore them completely. We are not just to rescue the lost with evangelism but also to recover and restore those who are found as we disciple and care for them as we nurture them in love into full grown faith.

Those recovered sheep are in need often of special care. We all have the sinful, rebellious tendency to wander from the fold of God. We need one another to hold ourselves accountable to remain in the fold, regardless of how difficult we might make life for one another. We must always be mindful of our own proclivity to wander and that each one of us is needy and beloved of God, who commands us to love one another. The truly spiritual that are called to restore the errant are usually those who remember how they too had strayed and been graciously and lovingly restored (Galatians 6:1).

The climax of these parables is the...

Rejoicing among God and his people

Imagine how strange and offensive this picture was to the judgmental, harsh and unloving religious leaders! Here is a picture of God himself, drawn as a jubilant shepherd and woman, throwing a party because lost sinners of doubtful reputation and those who were a plague upon good society had come home!

The church gathered for worship, service and fellowship should have a party-like atmosphere, charged with the joy of God. It was CS Lewis who said that joy is the serious business of heaven. That tells me that some so-called Christians and Christian congregations will need a heart change before they will be able to enjoy heaven.

Even as I gather into the fold, the fellowship of God's people, I can rejoice that, though I strayed in my mind and heart a bit this past week, I have come home. I've been found. Maybe that person who comes to Christ for the first time and who comes to life from total spiritual death has a more dramatic celebration, I too must celebrate. I must celebrate her or his return and also I must celebrate my own coming back to Christ as Lord of my life.

Like family and neighbors who collapse into each other's arms with the joy of relief over our rescue following an abduction or kidnapping, so should we rejoice every Lord's Day. And our joy on earth will be just a foretaste of the joy and celebration of heaven, where we will be finally and eternally safe.

Conclusion:

Jesus says to these self-righteous critics, "This is what God is like. See his regard for the lost; his rescue and recovery of them through the life and death of the Shepherd; his rejoicing over their restoration into the fold."

Maybe your thoughts of God have been as erroneous as those of the Pharisees and teachers of the law. Maybe you have thought that God is more interested in

judging and condemning than in saving, others as well as yourself. I hope that today you will see God in the heart of Jesus, who has come to seek and to save you. He has shown you your worth in his sight. And as with Francis Thompson he is seeking after you relentlessly. Turn to him today and know the joy of his salvation.

Those whom Jesus the Shepherd seeks are the outcasts, those of doubtful reputation. They are often the dregs of society and those we would tend to regard as a drain on society and on our resources. Those that Jesus is after may well not be those we would like to see show up as guests at East Madison Baptist Church. Maybe our need this morning is to repent of the sin of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, who somehow thought they deserved God's favor but not the "sinners" who were drawn to Jesus. Do you and I realize how we have strayed from God's love and forgotten how much he loves us and wants us to come home to the center of his presence, fellowship and blessing?

When any heart turns even quietly to God and receives his love, heaven breaks out into joyous celebration. You and I can give heaven reason to celebrate today as we come back fully and safely into the Father's love.

Thoughts and questions for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. Remember the last time you lost something truly valuable. What were your emotions and thoughts? What does this say to you about God's thoughts and feelings when we stray from him?
2. Do you have any family members or friends who are straying farther from God and his fold, the church? Name them as you pray for them.
3. How do you think we can increase our compassionate concern for those who are straying from God?
4. As you reflect on your own spiritual conversion and pilgrimage, what part did God play and what role did you play in your conversion and in the times you were restored?
5. In light of our text and Galatians 6:1, what is your responsibility toward those who have strayed from God?
6. Why should joy be the characteristic emotion of the church in worship, service and fellowship?

7. What have these parables taught you about the character of God and his thoughts and emotions toward those who are straying from his love? How will they change your thoughts of God and how you think he feels and thinks about you?

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