

August 16, 2020

Parables: The Lost Sheep

[Luke 15:1-7](#)

We are kicking off a new series this week looking at a few of the more famous parables that Jesus told during his time here on earth.

For a long time, I kind of just thought of Jesus' parables as a sort of simple sermon illustrations that he told to make the truth more acceptable or understandable to those around him.

But what I have discovered and come to realize is there is a whole lot more going on with these parables. Jesus' parables are stories that are thrown alongside truth to then illustrate that truth, with the intent to capture our hearts, expose our sin and need for a savior and to reveal the Kingdom of God.

They weren't these neatly packaged little stories that made things clear. In fact, they were quite the opposite. They were often stories that left listeners confused and searching for explanation.

Jesus gives us some insight into his reason for using parables in Matthew 13.

*This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. (Matthew 13:13)*

What it comes down to is a heart issue. Those who have a hard heart, also have closed eyes and closed ears and they don't understand. But to those who have ears to hear, they will listen, they will respond, and they will seek understanding.

Jesus spoke in parables not to make the truth clearer, but to hide the truth from the religious leaders of the day and reveal his purpose to those who were humble and truly seeking him and the truth of the kingdom of God.

I find helpful what N.T Wright says about the parables of Jesus.

*"As part of his campaign, Jesus told stories.... They were, for the most part, not simply 'illustrations,' that is, preachers' tricks to decorate an abstract thought or complicated teaching. If anything, they were the opposite. Jesus' stories are designed to tease, to clothe the shocking and revolutionary message about God's Kingdom in garb that would leave the listeners wondering, trying to think it out. They were stories that eventually caused Israel's leaders to decode his rich message in such a way as to frame a charge against him, either of blasphemy, sedition, or 'leading the people astray.' Whatever the parables are, they are not just, 'earthly stories with heavenly meaning.' Rather, they are expressions of Jesus' shocking announcement that God's Kingdom was arriving on earth as in heaven."— N. T. Wright, Simply Jesus, 87-88*

In Luke 15, Jesus tells three parables in response to the growing criticism from the Pharisees and religious leaders because he was hanging out with the wrong crowd. Who Luke identifies as the tax collectors and sinners.

It says the religious leaders were grumbling! Grumbling is a muttering of discontent. Which I think describes perfectly the attitude and actions of the religious leaders. They didn't approve at all of what Jesus was doing or saying and they grumbled constantly about it.

All three of these parables here in Luke 15 have to do with something that was lost and then found. The lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. I think of it as the "Lost and Found" department of parables. But for today I want to focus in on the parable of the lost sheep.

We have all felt it at some point in our life. The frustration, the worry, the anxiety, the sad feeling of losing something. Something of value, something we cared about, something we treasured deeply.

On the other less frequent side of that we may have also experienced that feeling of joy and bliss, happiness and relief that comes when you find whatever it was you thought you had lost.

Since March our family has had a card table set up in our living room for the main purpose of jigsaw puzzles. Anyone out there a jigsaw puzzle fans?

Personally, not really my thing. But I enjoy watching the family put together the puzzle, piece by piece. One piece at a time. Seeing the anticipation and excitement as it gets closer and closer to being complete and looking like the picture on the box.

One of the things I like to do is to hide a piece of the puzzle and watch as they just about complete it only to realize a piece is missing. If you could only see the looks on their faces 😊 Just kidding, that would be pretty cruel.

But perhaps that has actually happened to you or you can at least imagine how frustrating and discouraging it would be to get to the end of the puzzle and realize one piece is missing.

Most of us would go to great lengths to find that missing piece. Search the floor, the seat cushions, the box, the closet, the litter box, the couch. Because without that one piece it is an incomplete picture.

It doesn't matter that 99% of the puzzle is there and complete and together because all you can focus on is that one piece. Because without it something is missing. The picture is not complete.

In some ways this reminds me of what Jesus is getting at in the parable of the lost sheep. The good shepherd must go after the one lost sheep even though his flock is 99% complete. He doesn't think twice about it. He doesn't hesitate. It's not an option to let the one sheep go. He will search high and low until. Until that one sheep is found and brought back.

Without the one, something is missing. Without the one, the picture is incomplete. Without the one, the flock is not whole.

As N.T Wright pointed out, the parables *“are expressions of Jesus' shocking announcement that God's Kingdom was arriving on earth as in heaven.”*

So what does the parable of the Lost Sheep tell us about the kingdom of God?

In summary, the kingdom of God is like a good shepherd who has a flock of a hundred sheep who, losing just one of them, will leave the others and relentlessly search and go after the one that is lost until he finds it and brings it back, rejoicing and celebrating over what was lost is now found!

Fairly straightforward and clear. And yet if we dig a little deeper, we discover a few more layers to this parable which is what I want to look at today.

Specifically, what does this parable say about God and who God is; what does it say about us; and what does it say about our relationship to each other?

Early on in Luke's Gospel we discover Jesus' main mission and purpose. To seek and save that which was lost.

Luke 5:30-32 paints this picture:

*The Pharisees and their scribes were complaining to his disciples, saying, “Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?” Jesus answered, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance.”*

The religious leaders would immediately place themselves on the side of the righteous and holy and would draw the distinct line between them and “those people”. I imagine we all have our own version of “those people.” For the religious leaders it was the sinners. The outcasts. The unclean. The unworthy. The unwanted.

But the irony that is lost on the religious establishment is that they too were lost. As Paul reminds us in Romans 3.

*What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage? Not at all! For we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin. As it is written: “There is no one righteous, not even one... For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Romans 3:9-10; 23)*

Take it back even further to the prophet Isaiah who is pretty clear.

*All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way. (Isaiah 53:6)*

But what Jesus does in this parable is he gets right to the heart of who God is and the magnitude and depth of His grace, mercy and reckless love. He is the great seeking Shepherd!

God is the one that seeks and searches for us. The one who pursues us relentlessly.

God is not like the religious leaders. He doesn't grumble about sinners. He doesn't despise sinners. But He goes after the lost and rejoices along with all of heaven for all who were lost but are now found.

We see here the great grumbling of the religious leaders in contrast to the radical rejoicing of God for all those who have come to salvation in Jesus Christ.

Jesus paints this picture of our loving heavenly father, the good seeking shepherd by asking a question.

*Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?*

First off, what Jesus does here is he brings the religious leaders down a notch by asking them to put themselves in the shoes or sandals of a shepherd. Shepherds were unclean, untrustworthy and essentially the outcasts of society. It would be a tough pill to swallow for any of them to even hypothetically imagine themselves as a shepherd.

And then to leave 99 sheep in the wilderness to go after one lost one. IF you think about it, sheep aren't all that bright, they easily get distracted. They wander off, get lost, and can't defend themselves at all.

I admit I don't know much about shepherding and what an actual shepherd would do in this instance but personally it just seems like an unwise decision. I would think that even in the shepherding job field a 99% success rate is pretty good.

But not good enough for God. The good shepherd is more caring, more loving than any of us could ever be. With God, 99% is not good enough. With God nothing is lost. God's love for us is a reckless, scandalous, deep deep love in which God searches and seeks until He finds.

Jesus reminds us of this in just that one phrase he says about the good shepherd. "Until he finds it."

This emphasizes the determination and persistence of God for sinners to come to faith and saving grace of Jesus.

Notice Jesus doesn't say the shepherd searched "*until he got tired*" or "*until it got dark*" or "*until he quit and decided to go home.*" Jesus is clear the good seeking shepherd will continue to search for the missing and lost sheep "*until he finds it.*" Failure is not an option.

This is the God who loves us. And seeks after us. With God, nothing is lost!

What about us? What does this parable say about us? Have you been there? Have you ever felt like a lost sheep?

It can be easy for us to not see ourselves as the lost sheep. We think, "I am not that bad. I make pretty good choices. I try to love others."

But what I believe Jesus points out and reminds us of is that we have all been the lost sheep. Without Jesus and His salvation, we are lost. Without turning away from our sin and turning to God and living in way that shows others we belong to Him, we are lost.

Our sin and pride can easily blind us and keep us from even realizing that outside of Jesus we are lost.

One of the scariest feelings can be not realizing you are lost until you are actually really lost. So, it is so important for us to pause and ask God where we might be "lost" in our lives. Where have we wandered from Him? And as God reveals whatever that is then we bring it to Him. We turn to Him and feel His loving embrace as the good shepherd carries us and brings us back.

We are all "lost sheep" in some way or another, whether it is in regard to believing in Jesus as our savior, or to our deep needs for healing and restoration.

Either way Jesus assures us He loves us, and He is always with us. He is the one who cares and knows our needs. He knows we need Him, because without him we are lost.

In this parable Jesus then does what Jesus does so well and he throws a twist in the story. He brings a bigger and deeper truth.

*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.*

This gets to the core of our relationship with one another.

What if? What if you feel like one of the 99 sheep the shepherd left behind? What if you're one of the "good" sheep who didn't wander off? What if you have consistently stayed close to the shepherd?

It would be easy to think, "but don't I matter? Don't we as the 99 matter?"

I believe Jesus would reply, "Yes of course you matter. Of course, I love you! But right now, you aren't the one that is lost. You aren't the one in trouble."

Jesus is concerned about the ones who are lost. The ones who have been excluded. The ones who are in trouble.

Jesus is concerned about finding the missing one. 99 % is not good enough. The picture is incomplete. And when one who was lost is then found and brought back. We are called to rejoice! To rejoice and celebrate along with all of heaven and all of the angels. We are called to embrace and receive one another not as a project to be worked on, but as another person. As one of us, redeemed by God's grace alone. One who was lost but now is found!

The fact that the good shepherd goes out and seeks and searches until he finds the lost sheep should actually be good news for all the sheep.

Think about it. If the shepherd is willing to just settle for the 99 and shrug off the loss of just one sheep then none of the sheep can feel secure.

Because then, when I wander off and when, not if, I find myself lost how will I know I am not just an acceptable percentage of loss. That I am not worthy enough to be searched for?

Jesus the good shepherd, the one who leaves the 99 for the lost one, is good news for all of us because he knows us, and loves us, and every single one of us matters to him and when one is missing the picture is not complete. As God is the seeking shepherd whose job is to search and save. Our job is to search and welcome.

So, we welcome and rejoice with the savior what was lost is now found. God is the One who loves us so much. The One who pursues us with His reckless love. The One who searches, who finds, saves and restores lost people.