

**Glimpses of the Kingdom**  
***Seeking and Saving the Lost***  
**Luke 15:1-32**  
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“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I’m found; was blind, but now I see.” Those words, penned in 1772 by John Newton, an Anglican pastor who, as a young man, had been a slave trader, have stood the test of time. Today, more than 250 years after Newton wrote this hymn, the words are well-known inside and outside the church.

Some of you may recall nine years ago when President Barack Obama spontaneously led the audience in that song at the funeral of Reverend Clementa Pinckney, the pastor of the Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, where she and eight members of the church she pastored were shot and killed during a Bible study. I share that memory because I’m intrigued by our culture’s willingness to embrace the words to Newton’s song. Typically, we avoid describing ourselves with words like “wretch,” “lost,” and “blind,” but the truth is that separated from the love of our Heavenly Father through Jesus, every one of us is a wretch who is lost and blind.

As I begin the sermon today, I want you to know that that I believe God is looking for two responses to today’s message. First, if you’ve struggled to accept that God’s love is for you because of what you’ve done or how you perceive yourself, I hope you’ll see your Heavenly Father in a new light, and that you’ll open your heart to receive and experience his heart of love for you. Second, if you’re frustrated by the propensity you notice in yourself to judge and condemn others rather than reaching to them with Jesus’ love, my hope is that Jesus will convict you to confess that tendency to Him, and as you repent (that means to turn and go in a different direction) that you’ll be positioned to experience Jesus’ love and grace and forgiveness in a fresh way.

In this first part of our study of Luke’s gospel, I’ve been emphasizing Luke’s preoccupation with communicating the far-reaching, all-inclusive love of God as it was expressed by Jesus. As an outsider himself, Luke, a Gentile, understood at a deep level what it

meant to be included by Jesus, because in the Jewish culture of that day, he would have consistently received the message that he didn't belong, that God's love wasn't fully for him, because he wasn't one of God's chosen people. But Jesus brought a different message. He consistently communicated that God's love wasn't reserved for Jews or males or the wealthy. God's kingdom included Gentiles, women, and the poor. Everyone, no matter who they were or what they had done, could receive God's love and grace and favor. The kingdom of God was for everyone who willingly received Jesus' gift of salvation.

In Luke 19, Luke recorded the well-known story of Jesus' interaction with the tax-collector Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was despised by Jews because he was a tax-collector—a Roman collaborator who not only did the empire's dirty work of collecting taxes but also extorted additional funds from people to pad his own pockets. Tax collectors were synonymous with the word sinners, a term the religious elite used to describe those who weren't worthy of God's love and therefore should be avoided by devout Jews. Jesus invited himself to Zacchaeus' home, and when the tax collector offered to give his stolen wealth to the poor and to make restitution for all the funds he'd wrongly collected from people, Jesus told him that salvation had come to his house. Then Luke records these words of Jesus which summed up his mission: "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10).

I've titled today's sermon "Seeking and Saving the Lost," because those words are a fitting description for the three stories Jesus told in Luke 15. Luke leads into Jesus' story with these words in verses 1 and 2:

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." – Luke 15:1–2

Scenes like this one recur throughout the gospels where Jesus is interacting with people good Jews weren't supposed to interact with. Here they are identified as sinners and tax collectors, and the religious leaders were disgusted with Jesus for not following their protocols. In response Jesus tells them three parables about lost things. Parables were short stories that

illustrated profound spiritual truths. Parables were a favorite tool Jesus used at one level to convey simple truths about the kingdom of God while also sharing deeper insights. In this series of parables, Jesus illustrates his heart for people who were lost from God while also criticizing the religious leaders for their inability or unwillingness to celebrate lost people being restored to relationship with God. Jesus' first two parables are found in verses 3-10.

<sup>3</sup> Then Jesus told them this parable: <sup>4</sup> "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? <sup>5</sup> And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders <sup>6</sup> and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' <sup>7</sup> I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

<sup>8</sup> "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? <sup>9</sup> And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' <sup>10</sup> In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." – Luke 15:3-10

In both of these parables, Jesus highlights the energy people give to finding things that are lost. The shepherd, even though he has 99 other sheep, leaves them behind to go and search for the one that is lost. The woman, even though she has nine other coins, searches frantically for one that has been dropped or misplaced. Jesus concludes each parable by telling his audience that just as people celebrate when lost things are found, the angels in heaven rejoice when sinners who are lost, choose to repent, turn to God, and are saved.

At the end of the first parable about the lost sheep, Jesus takes a jab at the religious leaders—who are preoccupied with the holiness of those who are already God's people—by saying that heaven is more delighted over one person who repents and turns to God than over 99 righteous people who don't need to repent. As I read that statement, I'm reminded of

something Jesus said in Matthew's gospel. Matthew quoted Jesus as saying, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick." In making that statement, Jesus wasn't saying some of you are healthy and some are sick, and I've come to help the sick because the healthy are good without me. His point was that we're all sick, but He can only help those who recognize their illness. In this case, Jesus' point is that all of us need to repent, but only some recognize that need. Heaven rejoices over those who repent. Jesus took a little poke at the religious leaders in these parables, but it's at the end of his next parable that Jesus strongly indicts the Jewish leaders. That brings us to a parable many of us are familiar with—the parable of The Lost or Prodigal Son. I'll pick up that story at verse 11.

<sup>11</sup> Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup> The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

<sup>13</sup> "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. <sup>14</sup> After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup> He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

<sup>17</sup> "When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! <sup>18</sup> I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.' <sup>20</sup> So he got up and went to his father. – Luke 15:11-20a

I'll read the rest of the parable in a few moments, but first some background. The younger son in this story is presented to us as a real jerk. Demanding his inheritance while his father was still alive was the same as telling his father, "You are dead to me. So just give me my inheritance now." In a culture where honor and respect were highly valued, this just wasn't

done. My Bible heading describes this younger son as “The Lost Son,” but he’s also known as “The Prodigal Son.” The word prodigal means wasteful, and as we’ll see, it was an apt description for him.

As soon as the son got his money, he journeyed to a place far away and “squandered his wealth in wild living.” We’re not given details as to what wild living entailed, but we can draw our own conclusions. The young man was broke, and when a famine hit and everyone was in need, he was in a particularly bad spot. He was so destitute that he took a job that no self-respecting Jew would ever take. He fed pigs, unkosher animals Jews weren’t to eat or have contact with. As he fed the pigs, he was so hungry that the pig slop looked appetizing to him, but no one gave him anything to eat. In his desperation, he determined to swallow his pride and return to his father, offering to become a servant rather than his father’s son, and then he left for home. This is where we see our Heavenly Father’s heart of love for all of us.

“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

<sup>21</sup> “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

<sup>22</sup> “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. <sup>23</sup> Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. <sup>24</sup> For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So they began to celebrate. – Luke 15:20b-24

The fact that his father saw him while he was far off meant his father was still looking for him and hoping he’d return. The father had every reason to disown his son, because the son had essentially disowned his father by asking for his inheritance prior to his dad’s death. When he saw his son, the father ran to greet him. Respectable Jewish fathers didn’t run to greet anyone, especially not wayward sons who had publicly ridiculed them, but the father ran to his son, enveloped him in a big hug and kissed him. And when the son tried to say he was returning as a servant not as a son, the father wouldn’t let Him finish. He cut him off and instructed his

servants to bring the best clothes for the boy and to prepare a feast. Why? “For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.”

I want to make sure we see this. The picture we’re given of the father in this parable is a picture of our Heavenly Father’s deep, deep heart of love for every one of us. In fact, I believe this is one of the clearest pictures we’re given of our Heavenly Father’s love in all of Scripture.

I understand that the word father is painful for some of us. All of our fathers, and all of us as fathers, are flawed and imperfect—we’ve done things to our kids that weren’t in their best interest, and we’ve withheld things from them that they needed, but some of our fathers have hurt us especially deeply by what they’ve done to us or by what they’ve withheld. When the Bible talks about God as our Father and when Jesus refers to his Father and ours, this is the picture He’s trying to give us. No matter who we are or what we’ve done, God reaches out to us in love. He longs to embrace us and kiss and welcome us, his sons and daughters, home.

Now, let’s return to the conclusion of this parable, the part of the story that had the Pharisees’ and the other religious leaders’ names written all over it. In verse 25 we read,

<sup>25</sup> “Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. <sup>26</sup> So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. <sup>27</sup> ‘Your brother has come,’ he replied, ‘and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.’

<sup>28</sup> “The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. <sup>29</sup> But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. <sup>30</sup> But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’

<sup>31</sup> “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. <sup>32</sup> But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’” – Luke 15:25-32

Once again, God's heart of love, compassion, and inclusivity is contrasted with the Pharisees' and other religious leaders' exclusivity, judgment, and condemnation. The Pharisees were the older brother in Jesus' story. The father was ecstatic that his son had returned home, but the older brother was angry and refused to even attend the party his father was throwing. Listen to the older brother's response when his father pleaded with him to celebrate: "Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!"

He refers to life with his dad as "slaving for you." He said he never disobeyed his father's orders—undoubtedly an embellishment, because no child always obeys their parents. He claimed his father never gave him anything to celebrate with his friends. And he wouldn't even refer to the younger son as his brother, instead saying "this son of yours..."

The older brother's perspective, like the Pharisees, was completely skewed from reality. Rather than receiving and experiencing his father's love, the older brother felt obligated to work. Instead of enjoying life as the eldest son of a wealthy father, he felt restricted and unable to enjoy life. Rather than being able to celebrate his brother's return, he was jealous of what his brother received that he hadn't.

The older brother was the Pharisees, and sadly, many of us can identify with him as well. I know that because I was headed down the judgmental, religious path of the older brother until my late teen years and into my 20s. I had the blessing of being raised in a good Christian home and in a Bible-believing church, but like the older brother, for the first 19 or so years of my life, being a Christian felt burdensome and confining rather than fulfilling and enjoyable. It was difficult for me to celebrate people who were saved from brokenness, pain, and sin because I didn't recognize what God had saved me from. My trip down the path of the older brother changed when God brought a pastor into my life who showed me Christianity was about relationship with Jesus rather than following religious rules; when I met friends at seminary who obviously loved Jesus even though they didn't follow the same list of dos and don'ts I thought were mandatory; and later as a pastor, when I encountered people like my friend Big Steve whose lives were in the process of being transformed from addiction and

profound brokenness as they experienced God's grace. God used all of those things and more to show me that even though I had been saved by Jesus as a child and had obediently followed Him my whole life up to that time, I was still a man who needed a Savior. And when God broke through my hard heart to show me my need of his love and grace and forgiveness, He softened my heart with compassion for those who didn't know Him—who were lost and in desperate need of his love, grace, mercy, forgiveness, healing and restoration to relationship with Him.

I still have older brother tendencies at times, but God is at work in me, transforming me with his love and forgiveness and grace and giving me more and more of his heart for people who don't know Him. And that's my heart for each of us and for our church family as a whole. I long to see each of us experience our Heavenly Father's heart of love just like the lost son did, knowing that as we continue to experience God's heart for us and receive his grace, we can't help but share his love and grace and forgiveness with others.

At the outset of the sermon, I shared two responses I believe God is seeking from us today. First, if you've struggled to accept that God's love is for you because of what you've done or how you perceive yourself, I hope you'll see your Heavenly Father in a new light and that you'll respond to the invitation to receive and experience his heart of love for you.

Second, if you're frustrated by the bitterness you see in your life and your propensity to judge and condemn others rather than reaching to them with Jesus' love, my hope is that Jesus will convict you to confess those tendencies to Him, and as you repent (that means to turn and go in a different direction) that you'll be positioned to experience Jesus' love and grace and forgiveness in a fresh way.