

Sermon 77: Luke 15:1-10: Seeking and Saving the Lost

OUTLINE

Seeking
Celebrating

INTRODUCTION

God loves sinners and He seeks for them to save them. John Stott shares this truth from the experience of Augustine: 'He was born in North Africa (in what we now call Algeria) in the middle of the fourth century. Already in his teens he was leading a dissolute, even promiscuous, life, enslaved by his passions. He wrote in his *Confessions*: Clouds of muddy carnal concupiscence filled the air. The bubbling impulses of puberty befogged and obscured my heart so that it could not see the difference between love's serenity and lust's darkness. Confusion of the two things boiled within me. It seized hold of my youthful weakness sweeping me through the precipitous rocks of desire to submerge me in a whirlpool of vice.

Even while half-drowned in sin, Augustine also plunged into study, and his studies took him first to Carthage, and then to Rome and to Milan. A great tug of war was going on in his mind between Christianity (which at this time he rejected) and Manicheism (which he had embraced). In this turmoil of moral shame and intellectual confusion he found himself in utter misery. Yet, through his inner restlessness of mind and conscience, as also through the prayers and tears of his saintly mother Monica, and through the kindly admonitions of Bishop Ambrose of Milan, Jesus Christ was surely pursuing him.

As with Saul of Tarsus, so with Augustine of Hippo, the climax came suddenly. He went out into the garden attached to his lodgings, accompanied by his friend Alypius. He threw himself down under a tree and let his tears flow freely, as he cried out, 'How long, O Lord?' As I was saying this and weeping in the bitter agony of my heart, suddenly I heard a voice from the nearby house chanting as if it might be a boy or a girl (I do not know which), saying and repeating over and over again, 'pick up and read, pick up and read ...' I checked the flood of tears and stood up. I interpreted it solely as a divine command to me to open the book and read the first chapter I might find ... So I hurried back to the place where Alypius was sitting. There I had put down the book of the apostle when I got up. I seized it, opened it and in silence read the first passage on which my eyes lit: 'Not in riots and drunken parties, not in eroticism and indecencies, not in strife and rivalry, but put on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provision for the flesh in its lusts' (Romans 13:13–14). I neither wished nor needed to read further. At once, with the last words of this sentence, it was as if a light of relief from all anxiety flooded into my heart. All the shadows of doubt were dispelled.

Augustine attributed his experience to the sheer grace, that is, the free and unmerited favour, of God. He claimed that God had quickened all five of his spiritual senses—hearing, sight, smell, taste and touch:

You called and cried out loud and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness. You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you. I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours.¹

¹ Stott, J. (2003). [Why I Am a Christian](#) (pp. 21–23). Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press.

If you are a Christian today it is because of this truth, God sought you and saved you. Now we take this wonderful truth of God for granted, but the picture of God as the Shepherd who goes in search of the sheep is not new but is a picture found in the OT, Ezek. 34:16, 'I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.' But at the time of Christ it was not the picture the first century Judaism had of God. Yet this is the God that Jesus incarnates and invites sinners to.

Luke 15 is a key chapter which places the picture of God as a seeker and Savior forward in three memorable parables, the parable of the lost sheep, lost coin and lost son. In each of these parables something precious is lost, searched for and found with celebration. You will notice an intensification as 1 out of 100 sheep goes missing, yet the shepherd goes searching, then 1 out of 10 coins goes missing and the housewife goes searching, and 1 out of 2 sons goes astray and the Father seeks His sons return earnestly. Luke 14 and 15 stand in contrast to one another. In 14:1 we see the religious leaders gathering around Jesus but only to watch Him and to catch Him out, but in 15:1 we see sinners and tax collectors attracted to Christ and gathering around Him to hear Him, 'Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him.' Tax collectors we know were seen as the scum of the earth because they worked for Rome and that against their own people. They were known to add their own profit onto the back of the Roman taxes and relied on Roman authorities to enforce the injustice. They were seen as traitors and not welcome at anyones table or parties. 'Sinners' is the word used to describe perceived to be outside the law and who have forfeited a relationship with God. V1 emphasizes that they 'all' drew near to Him. The question we are forced to ask at this point is this: why were they so drawn to Christ and not to the religious leaders?

They obviously sensed something different about Jesus. When He looked at them He would not have looked at them with eyes full of contempt and accusation. When He spoke to them He would not fling cheap verbal assaults that refused to view them as individuals but just branded them as outcasts. He was willing to spend time with them, not to approve or participate in their sins but to preach the truth to them. The message that He preached was one where no matter who you are, you are a sinner but God receives the poor in Spirit. So come, freely and receive the gift of eternal life. The poor in Spirit can be adopted as children of God, no matter their past, and they will be given the inheritance of children, the kingdom of God. He presented a God who gives laws like the Sabbath, not as a burden but as a gift. In the miracles being dispersed it was all people who received not only the so called 'good'. They had hearts that were hungry and sin and hypocritical religion could not satisfy them, they were primed and ready for the truth.

But this put Jesus at odds with the religion of the day, v2, 'And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." What a contrast between how Jesus, who is incarnating God's love for sinners, and the religion of the day that had lost sight of God's love for people in a zeal to keep rules to produce their own righteousness. That word 'grumbled' only appears twice in the NT, here and when Jesus visited Zacchaeus's house. The Pharisees saw themselves as forbidden from eating with, entering into business dealings with, or any other social engagement with those who were perceived to be outside the law. The word describing Christ's accepting of sinners, that word 'receive' literally means 'to have good will towards.' This was the polar opposite to the attitude of the Pharisees. Rabbinic teachings say that eating with such people will make you unclean and that you should not even associate with them even if it is to bring them to the law. O how different this is to God's attitude. He is willing to draw near in order to win us to Himself.

Jesus then goes on to tell 3 parables, we will look at the first two, the parable of the lost sheep and the lost coin. All of these parables are given as a rebuke to the attitude that does not seek the salvation of sinners, nor delight in their salvation. These parables are given to expose the wrong priorities of legalism. Since the parables are so similar we will take them together and look at them under two headings, the seeking and the celebrating.

Seeking

V3-4, 'So he told them this parable: 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?' Jesus uses the picture of a shepherd and his sheep. This is a familiar picture of God's care towards His people. We need think no further than Ps. 23 to see God as a shepherd towards His people. Leaders like the Pharisees were often spoken of as shepherds who shepherd God's flock, e.g. Ezekiel 34. The emphasis in this story is the willingness on the part of the shepherd to go searching for his lost sheep. If a sheep was separated from the flock in Israel, that was a serious thing. There were predators in the hills, there was a lack of water and food, the shepherd would need to lead the sheep to or provide these things. There was the heat and the rugged terrain that could endanger the sheep. We see a picture of alacrity as the shepherd does not first take the other sheep back to the fold but immediately responds to rescue the lost sheep. We also see a picture of dedication and commitment, the text says, 'until he finds it.'

If God is a good shepherd, then we are good sheep, we are good at being just like sheep. Like sheep we go astray, like sheep we separate from safety and put our lives at risk, like sheep we frighten at shadows, like sheep we follow the crowd. One of the humbling truths of the gospel is that we are all sheep and not shepherds, we are not able to save ourselves and provide for ourselves but we need God.

The next parable gives a similar picture of commitment, v8, '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?' Now in a bartering society money would have more value than it does for us. Each coin was worth a day's wages and it is thought that this could be her dowry or her savings. To lose one coin was to lose a 10th of what she had. We see this committed housewife spring-cleaning in order to secure her coin. We are told that she lit a lamp, this was likely because not every room would have windows to let in natural light. And she swept ensuring that every inch of the ground was covered. And she diligently sought until she found it. You have heard the difference between a man-look and a woman-look for something, this is a woman-look.

Both these pictures fall short of describing God's true dedication to searching out sinners. You can get creative and really expand the narrative about the shepherd. We could tell the story speaking about how he went over mountains and through valleys, how he battled wolves and bears, we could talk about how he braved storms and heat, how he endured deprivations of hunger and thirst, how his life was nearly lost falling into crevices and off ledges, and yet how he endured until he found his quarry. But this would still fall short of describing God's commitment to saving sinners. We could use the language of moving heaven and earth to save us and even this does not capture His efforts. God has done something greater than moving heaven and earth to save us, God become man. The infinite One stepped into time, the Creator became a creature, the One who sustains the universe became dependent. But more than that the sinless One took our sin upon Himself, the One who gives life to all had His life taken from Him. And He did not merely die, He died unjustly; and He died a death that none of us can endure as He was forsaken by God.

Jesus Christ is the Good Shepherd who has come to seek and save the lost, He does not only risk His life but He gives His life in the place of the sheep. Jesus Himself says, John 10:11, 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.'

Celebrating

We have seen God's dedication in searching but the goal of all of these parables is to help us see God's delight in finding the lost sinner. V5, 'And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing.' There is a whole sermon in this single picture. We are not told anything about the sheep. If this was a lamb then the act of carrying it would have been easier. If the animal was an adult this would have been a major undertaking. Sheep were not trained to walk on a leash and it could be that the sheep was exhausted or injured so the Shepherd carries the sheep home. What a beautiful picture of nurture and care. Here is a sheep who has put the shepherd out and yet is being served by being carried in this fashion. Here is a picture of restoration, of healing, or sustaining and of ensuring that the sheep reaches home. Not only found but carried. This is a picture of rich provision by a God who is willing to serve sinners. Compare this attitude to the attitude of the Pharisees who would not touch or eat with sinners. God presents Himself as the diligent seeker and servant of the recalcitrant sheep.

The surprise in all of these parables is the note of joy. We are told in each parable of the joy of heaven, the joy of the angels and the joy of the Father at the returning sinner. V6, '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.' Having joy at the finding of a sheep is understandable, but throwing a party for the neighborhood because you have found a sheep is a little weird. And again in v9, '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.' Surely it would cost money to throw such a party? I think that is the point of the parables. The parables begin by appealing to common and understandable sentiments, 'what man of you,' 'Or what woman.' We can appreciate the desire to recover a sheep or money. But then the parable goes into territory which we don't relate to. The amount of joy experienced over one sheep or one coin is OP. And that is the point, this is how joyful God is when a sinner is saved.

Some of the strongest pictures of God joy in the Bible are when God restores His people to Himself, Is. 62:4-5, 'You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate, but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married; for the Lord delights in you, and your land shall be married. For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your sons marry you, and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you.' Zeph. 3:17, 'The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.' V17 shows us a God who is delighting in His sinful people. Here we see a sinner's wildest dreams come true. Can a holy God delight Himself in me? Here we see that He does and will. He rejoices over you, this means that you bring joy to the heart of God. He is full of gladness when He considers you. The phrase, 'He will quiet you with His love' could also be 'He is quiet over you in love.' Either comforting or doting, both are true. And we see God exulting in us with loud singing. God sings at the restoration of His people. How can a holy God delight in His people so? Only in Christ! He is passionate, exuberant, and celebrating in our salvation because He delights in His Son. We are beautiful and attractive and loved, and delighted in, all in the Son. God does not change His holiness, but makes us to be a partaker of it by taking our human flesh, wearing it and producing a garment fit for God's presence. Jer. 32:41, 'I will rejoice in doing them

good, and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, with all my heart and all my soul.' We know that our God is a God of joy, but the Scripture especially emphasizes His joy in relation to restoring sinners to Himself.

This is the God that the Pharisees should have known, these are all verses from the OT, but they had become consumed with their own righteousness and efforts, they did not look to God's mercy but their own efforts. And taking their eyes off of a God who alone is able to save sinners and is willing to do so, they looked at others with the same scales they evaluated themselves. Christ emphasizes this joy further, v7, '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.' Christ emphasizes God's joy by showing that heaven rejoices over one sinner repenting. V10 adds to this, 'Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.'" I remember someone preaching on this verse as a young Christian and asking this question: why do the angels rejoice? Well, firstly they rejoice because they are perfectly holy and therefore they love what God loves and hate what God hates. They do not have a separate agenda that directs their joys. But secondly, we know from other parables that it is the angels who will have to put in the dragnet and separate out the good from the bad and throw those who are being judged into hell. No doubt they rejoice even over one sinner as one less sinner that they need to cast into judgement.

What a glorious picture of our God. These certainly are humble pictures, a diligent shepherd and housewife, yet they convey some of the richest theological truths about the love and joy of God. God loves sinners; He willingly pours Himself out in order to save them. He pursues them until He finds them, He carries them upon His shoulders until He brings them home and He rejoices over their restoration. The challenge of this portion is a simple one. Are we like God who is dedicated to and delights in the salvation of sinners, or are we like the Pharisees who do not share God's priorities? The challenge of these parables is for us to imitate God in His committed search to finding sinners. Will we be those who go all out to find those who do not believe in God and do all that we can to bring them home? Will we be those who bear one another's burdens as the shepherd bore the sheep on His shoulders? Are our joys in line with Gods that we delight in what He delights in? Think of the apostle Paul who was in prison and some were preaching out of spite. He rejoiced as long as the gospel was preached because then sinners can be saved. Knowing that God is a seeker of sinners and who celebrates at their return will we join Him in His pursuits and His joys?