



LOST: Parables of a God Who Pursues

The Lost Sheep: Lessons From a Seeking Savior

Tim Badal | September 15, 2019

This morning we start a new four-week series we've entitled "Lost." We're going to be looking at Luke 15, which some have called "The gospel in the Gospel." In it, Jesus tells three stories about His immeasurable love for us, His people, and how He has gone to great lengths to find that which was lost and bring us back into His fold. We'll learn about His perseverance and resilience in seeking after us and finding us when we have gone far away from Him.

This series will teach us not only the great gifts Jesus had for us while He was here on earth, but also the great compassion He has now as He rules and reigns from heaven over His people. Now the calling He has for us as His people is to be rescuers who will go as He did to seek and save the lost through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The central theme is that of lost things being found:

- A lost sheep that was found by the shepherd.
- A lost piece of silver that was found by a woman.
- A lost son who was embraced by a loving father.
- A lost sibling who will be embraced by that same father, even though he never wandered far from home.

Part of human existence is the reality that we lose things. If we've been on this earth for any amount of time, at some point we have all lost something of value. We've lost keys to our cars. We've lost our wallets. We've lost our cell phones. I'm really excited that my phone now has an app to help me find my home. It's called "Where's My Phone"—a perfect app for an absent-minded person like myself. And we lose other things. Recently I was on a community Facebook page about the town fair going on in our community. At the fair, a woman had lost her wedding ring that went back three generations. We lose things of great value to us. But no matter what we lose, we go through the same process:

- First, we realize we've lost something.
- Then there is the fear we'll never find it.
- This is followed by an all-out search by us and others to find this thing.

That's exactly what Jesus is talking about. But as important as a ring is, as important as a wallet or a cell phone may be to us, Jesus is talking about something of greater importance. He is telling us we're lost and we've been lost for some time. Some of the first words spoken in the Garden of Eden after the fall was the question God asked as He searched for Adam: "Adam, where are you?"

Now, Adam knew where he was. He was in the Garden of Eden. God knew where Adam was. God is omniscient and knows everything. But the question implied that Adam was lost spiritually. The Bible says over and over again that each of us are lost spiritually as well. We are in the dark. We're so lost that in fact we are dead in our trespasses and sins. All of humanity is lost.

We work really at pretending we're not lost. "Oh, I know exactly where I'm going and which way to go." But sadly, all of us—men, women and children—are lost and because we are lost, we are without hope if we try to be found on our own.

Luke 15 gives us three stories that show how, in the middle of being lost, there is One Who is searching for us. There is One Who will not grow tired until He finds us. Within these three stories we are given three illustrations of those who go on an all-out search and are victorious in finding what they are looking for. We are a lost people and we have Someone—praise be His name—Who is out looking for us.



These stories are going to happen in a time during Jesus' ministry that might be surprising to us. I learned these three stories as a little kid in Sunday school class, primarily hearing the first and third stories—the lost sheep and the story of the prodigal son. I remember the illustration in my little Children's Bible. Jesus was sitting under a tree on a beautiful sunny day, preaching to a group of happy people. But that was entirely wrong. Jesus was actually dealing with a tense situation. In order to understand the stories we hope to learn from over these next weeks, we need to remember the context in which they were taught.

1. Understanding this famous parable involves remembering the situation.

Let's go to Luke 15, beginning in verse one: *"Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear [Jesus]. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them.'"* Those Pharisees were always grumbling. As Jesus was doing His ministry in Palestine in the first century, there was a pattern of cause and effect. When Jesus did something—when He taught, preached, healed or exorcised demons—the people always wanted more. When Luke said they were all drawing near to Jesus, they were actually squishing Him. They wanted to be with Him constantly, so we often read how Jesus had to retreat from them to be with His Father.

Jesus was unlike anyone these people had ever seen or experienced. He taught with both authority and humility. He taught about justice, but He also spoke with love, grace, mercy and compassion. He had all the knowledge of the greatest Pharisee, yet He brought his teachings down to simple, tangible, easy-to-grasp truths. Even His greatest critics could not deny the signs and wonders He performed.

Luke tells us about two types of people.

Jesus was the phenom of Palestine and people were drawn to Him. These people, however, can be divided into two groups. The first group included the tax collectors and sinners. We might see this as representing white-collar sinners and blue-collar sinners—or perhaps even no-collar sinners.

The white-collar sinners were the tax collectors. Right away in our American context we think of IRS agents. This is really unfair to IRS agents. The first century tax collectors were not good people. They were Jews who had been hired by the Roman Empire to collect taxes from the Jewish people. In that sense, these were Jews who were being employed by the enemy and their job was to levy money from their family, friends and neighbors, then give that money to the enemy.

What made them doubly unpopular was they could easily practice extortion, not only to give more to Rome, but also as their own source of income. The Bible tells us they stole for themselves, as we see in the story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10). After meeting Jesus, he specifically mentioned stealing from people. As part of his repentance, he promised to return fourfold all that he had stolen. It was this practice that caused tax collectors to be hated in Jesus' day. They were rich, so that's why we can call them the white-collar sinners. But some of these people who had such a low reputation in their community had nevertheless fallen in love with Jesus.

The second part of the first group who surrounded Jesus were the blue-collar sinners. These were people who had been banned from the temple, because in some way they were unclean. It might have been their occupation or lifestyle. They not only did not meet the standards of Moses, they also had not kept the standards of holiness established by the scribes and Pharisees. These were the fornicators, adulterers and swindlers. These were people with a past, who hung around with all the wrong people. Yet they too had fallen in love with Jesus and wanted to be near Him. These were the blue-collar or no-collar sinners—the ones who might have taken us aback had they shown up at church today.

Why would these sorts of people flock to Jesus? As broken and sinful as they were, Jesus was speaking grace to them. He offered them love and mercy and acceptance, giving them an opportunity for new life. Like those seeking cool water on a blistering hot day, these people came in droves to get what Jesus offered them.

Enter the second group: the Pharisees and scribes. The Pharisees were the religious muckety-mucks of the first century. They were the important people who established the regulations of Jewish religious life. They were the ones who told you whether or not you were going to heaven. They decided if you were good enough to be part of their religious club. They decided if you had dotted all your I's and crossed all your T's and thus were worthy to be accepted by God.

The scribes were important because they had the task of copying the canon of Scripture—the law and the prophets. They did all they could to protect the sacred words, which were read and studied only by those who were worthy of that task. They were religious leaders who also helped to determine who was loved by God.

Luke tells us about one big problem.

In Luke 15, Jesus was not simply addressing the crowd of people who loved Him, but was surrounded by a tense mix of people. One group of people knew they were broken sinners who were drawn to Jesus because of the grace He offered. At the same time, the other group was telling them they could not be close to God, because God did not accept those whose lives were not put together right.

That produced an ongoing tension in this moment in Luke 15, where Jesus found Himself. He's claiming He's the Messiah, but the Pharisees and scribes were grumbling because they didn't understand how a holy and righteous God could spend time with tax collectors, prostitutes, fornicators and swindlers. If God was going to put on flesh and dwell among us, the Pharisees were sure He would only hang out with those who were righteous, as they believed themselves to be.

How did Jesus decide to address this tense situation? In classic fashion, He did it by telling three stories. In these stories, He incorporated those who were broken and flawed, who were swallowed up in their sin, speaking specifically to them. But He also included those who believed it was their place to decide who received mercy and who didn't.

That's what's so great about these three stories: the lost sheep, the lost silver and the lost son. Within each story, we get to find ourselves. Jesus took the problem of two opposed factions and in these stories He was able to address everyone involved. But in order for us to be changed by these stories, we have to relive them.

In Luke 15:3, Jesus specifically calls us to see ourselves in these stories. For example, He wants us to put on our shepherd's gear and become a shepherd. Maybe today you're a Pharisee, thinking you can decide who is holy and who's sinful. Based on your criteria, you can say who's clean and who's unclean. Jesus has a word for you, Pharisee.

Or maybe today you've come here broken. Your sin is always before you. Your mistake and failures, both those others see and those only God sees, cause you to think, "How can a just and righteous God possibly love me? How could He accept me?" Not only does Jesus love and accept you, He's been on an all-out search to find you in your wandering. You may be the sheep in the story.

The great thing about Jesus' storytelling is He addresses two completely different groups of people with the same gospel and the same challenge. To be loved and accepted by God is to put ourselves into the story, without looking to the left or the right to what others are thinking or how they're responding.

2. Understanding this famous parable involves reliving the story.

This is a simple story, so I'm not going to spend a lot of time here. Even people who aren't well-versed in the Bible know this story. It's a parable, which is a simple story with a significant meaning. Here's how it goes:

⁴What 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? ⁵And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶And 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.'

There's the story. The application comes in verse seven and we'll address that in a moment. The story is just a few verses long. You could read it to a kindergartener and they could tell you exactly what happens. There are four characters in the story: the wandering sheep, the flock of 99 sheep, the shepherd and his neighbors.

The story involves running.

There's not much of a plot. The flock is together, one wanders off, the shepherd recognizes it's gone, so he goes and finds it. He puts it on his shoulders, brings it back rejoicing, then when he gets home, he has a party so his friends and neighbors can rejoice with him. This is not advanced literature, yet the significance of this story is huge.

Right away, Jesus talks about sheep. Of all the characters He could have picked, He chose a sheep and a shepherd. Sheep are dirty—and shepherds are dirty people who work with them. Shepherds are a low class in society. This would have irritated the Pharisees. When He said, "Suppose one of you was a shepherd," I wonder if the Pharisees put their hands across their chests and said, "Never. I'd never do that. That would be beneath me." But Jesus did not hesitate to ask them to enter that role and in a sense, they were shepherds. They were religious leaders—the under-shepherds who were to care for the nation of Israel—but they had failed because they didn't care about the sheep.

The Old Testament book of Ezekiel speaks of how the religious leaders literally cannibalized the sheep for their own benefit. They would slaughter and eat the ones they were called to care for. God told them through Ezekiel, "Let this never be said of My leaders," but that's

exactly what the Pharisees were doing in Jesus' day. Leaders are called to pastor the sheep. The very word "pastor" —*poimen* in the Greek—means shepherd. My job and the job of the elders is to shepherd the flock of God here at Village Bible Church.

Scripture also tells us that we're like sheep, and like sheep, we have gone astray. What about sheep makes them like us? First of all, sheep are very dumb creatures. Sometime google "dumb things sheep do" and you'll find lots of articles. In one of them, there was a situation years ago in Turkey that caught my attention. A shepherd was watching over a 300-head flock of sheep in a plateaued area of Turkey. One of the sheep made the decision to walk away from the flock and walked off a cliff. The shepherd had never seen anything like it, but what happened next astounded him even more. You would think the flock would say, "Hey, I don't know what Tony drank last night, but that was stupid. He's dead now. Word to the wise—stay away from the cliff." But not so with sheep. The shepherd watched more than 240 other sheep follow Tony. I thought maybe the first few sheep with their woolly coats would cushion the rest so the later ones wouldn't die. No, the Turkish shepherd said they all fell to their death. What were they thinking? They weren't. They're dumb creatures.

The second thing we need to understand is they're directionless. They have no idea which way they're going. Yesterday on Facebook I saw a post that someone in our church had learned about a lost dog. This morning, I was going through my internet feed and can you believe it? After 19 hours of being gone, the dog showed up at the back door of his home. Who knows where that dog went? . It had lots of burrs in its fur. Dogs are smart. They have a good sense of direction. Their navigation system brings them back. You may have heard stories of when a family was on vacation with their dog, hundreds of miles from home, the dog ran away and somehow made its way back home. Dogs are smart. Sheep can wander away and they have no idea where they are, where they've come from or where they're going.

There's a classic book by Phillip Keller called [The Shepherd's View of the 23rd Psalm](#). He was a shepherd in Canada for many years and though he could give insight into this Psalm. He wrote that when sheep wander away, they are always in trouble and have no idea where they're going.

Finally, sheep are defenseless. They can't bark. They don't have big teeth. In fact, what do we do with sheep? We put our little kids next to sheep in petting zoos. If you get freaked out by a sheep when it goes baaaaah, you need help. Sheep are so relaxing and docile that when we are having trouble sleeping, we tell people what? Count them. There's nothing more pure and innocent than a woolly little sheep.

But this is what Jesus says about us. We are dumb. We think we're smart, but we're not. We're directionless. We don't know what to do. We don't have a purpose in life. We try to make things purposeful in life, but in and of ourselves, as Solomon said, it's all chasing after the wind. And quite frankly, we're defenseless against the trials and tribulations that come our way. We are ill-prepared for what may befall us.

Back to the parable where Jesus said one sheep had left the 99. Nowhere in the text does it tell us why. Matthew 19:12 says the sheep had gone astray. So a sheep had run away. It might have been distracted or perhaps disobedient. But it left where he should be to go somewhere he should not be. Doesn't that describe all of us? We all like sheep have gone astray, each one of us turning our own way (Isaiah 53:6).

The story involves reconnaissance.

The shepherd recognizes that the sheep is missing, so he decides to leave the 99 in open country to go after the lost sheep. The phrase "go after" implies an all-out pursuit. He won't stop until he finds the sheep. If that means he has to forego comforts or adjust to schedule changes, he will do that to find that lost one.

The story involves recovery.

The shepherd finds the sheep, but in the process of recovery, we don't read about any rebuke or stern words or discipline. He doesn't break its leg or use some other means to keep it from ever wandering again. Instead, he picks up the sheep, willing to take on the extra burden, to bring it back home. Maybe he picked it up because the sheep was injured or tired, but he did whatever was needed to safely bring it back to the flock where it would again be safe.

The story involves rejoicing.

Instead of complaining, all we read about is the shepherd rejoicing. He's found that which was lost and his heart is filled with joy. He rejoices privately, then when he returns home the rejoicing becomes public. He calls his friends and neighbors to celebrate with him. So that's the story. It's simple, but it contains an incredible truth

The story involves repentance.

Jesus doesn't leave us wondering what He was trying to communicate. He tells us directly in verse seven: *"Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven..."* (we'll address that phrase next week because it's also in next week's passage) *"...over one sinner..."* Wait a minute. Is Jesus telling us the sheep represents a sinner? *"There will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."*

Jesus is telling the Pharisees exactly why He chooses to eat with sinners. It's because they're lost. They need the gospel. He says, "I'm going to leave the 99 and go after the one, because the one needs Me." Each of us who are sinners have also had that significant moment when we've wandered far from God, but instead of chastising us or bringing us down to our doom, God comes running after us, seeking us as we're wandering. Then when He finds us, He puts us on His shoulders and carries us home where we're protected and loved and fed.

That is the story of your salvation experience. You and I were lost, wandering far from God's fold. In doing that, we opened ourselves to all kinds of perils. But the Great Shepherd searched for us and did not give up until He found us. He scooped us up in His grace and mercy, bearing the burden so that we would be drawn back to Him. That's our story. That's the story of every sinner who is saved by the grace and love of a seeking Savior. Whether we want to admit it or not, this is what Jesus has done and is doing for us. It's a simple story, but we need to see ourselves in it.

3. Understanding this famous parable involves realizing the significance.

Finally, we need to realize the significance of this first of the three stories Jesus told. This involves asking four questions.

Is your proximity to sinners a problem?

Your first response to this question might be to quote, "Bad company corrupts good character." That's true. But that's not what Jesus is asking. Rather, He's asking if we're choosing to wall ourselves off from the unbelieving world around us, trying to keep ourselves from the rescue mission He modeled for us. Christ came to seek and save that which was lost.

To find lost people, you have to go where they are, but we can be really good at walling ourselves off from unbelievers. We can be too busy doing ministry in the church to have time to engage our communities. That means we are like the Pharisees, only standing with the clean and holy people—people who live like us and dress like us—instead of going to the place where we're needed most. It is there where we will find people who are broken and lost, sheep without a shepherd. When we do this, we're lacking the very compassion God wants His people to have.

Notice Luke says in Luke 15:1 that the people were "drawing near" to Jesus, because the scribes and Pharisees were grumbling that Jesus "receives sinners." In our vernacular, receive means to give full access to. He made time for them. He created relational space for them. He made room in His life, not only to receive them, but to eat with them.

In the Middle Eastern culture, to eat with a person is to acknowledge their high value. Their meals take hours, so that means giving a person a lot of your time. You show them your trust by bringing them into your home. Jesus is saying this is how we should receive sinners. We're to make space for them in our lives.

That person you work with, that neighbor of yours, that person in your school who's living in that wrong way—your job isn't to wall them off. Rather, you need to create relational space so they might see the salvation message lived out in your life. They need to be aware that there is a holy, righteous and loving God Who is on an all-out search for them and Who has compassion and mercy for them.

Is your proximity to sinners a problem? If we're honest, most of us would say it is. We're not interacting with sinners around us who need the gospel of Jesus Christ. But God calls us to this.

Are you willing to go or just grumbling?

We just heard a testimony about the Network of Nations. I'm not going to get into the political nature of it, but we can agree there's a lot of grumbling about people coming and going in our country right now, about who should and should not be here. That's a hotly debated topic and there's a lot of grumbling on both sides. I'm glad the Network of Nations is not grumbling about the problem of immigration, the problem of outsiders. Rather, they're going to them. This is a group of churches who have taken on the mission of caring for people, instead of grumbling about how these people are changing our culture. They realize these are people who are lost, so they have decided to make relational space for them. They're going to represent God so that the lost will be found by Him.

It's our choice. Are we just going to grumble about what we see or are we going to go? I've learned in my 43 years that if you're not going, you're grumbling. I never hear grumbling from people in the church who are actively serving. It's the spectators who complain.

Remember the two old dudes in the Muppet Show in the balcony? Everybody else is having a grand time doing the show, but those two guys who aren't doing anything are upstairs grumbling. We have a call to not be the Pharisees in this story who grumble about the people Jesus is interacting with. Instead, we should be going to them ourselves.

That's why I love this church. Jesus has helped our church, by His grace and mercy, to see the world through His eyes. We could grumble about the troubles we have in Aurora, but I see Robin Sterkel out here who has gone to the least of these on the east side of Aurora. . She hasn't grumbled; she's gone. She's also taken dozens of our kids with her. They're not grumbling about the kids in the inner city, but rather have experienced God's love and compassion for lost and broken people.

We can grumble, my friends, or we can go. Jesus wants us to go.

Are you rejoicing in God's rescue?

The first two questions are about you serving others, but now I want you to serve yourself for a moment. I want you to remember your salvation story. Remember how you once were lost and how you were found. In other words, put yourself in the shoes of that lost sheep. Have you forgotten the feeling of being lost? Have you forgotten what it was like to feel isolated and alone? Have you forgotten what it was like to see the Shepherd coming on the horizon? Do you remember wondering how He would respond to you? Would He be angry? And do you remember your joy when you realized He was not angry, but instead loved you and wanted to care for you?

Have you been saved so long that you have forgotten what it was like to be lost and then found? Have you forgotten what it was like to be blind? To be held captive by the evil one? Have you forgotten the great joy of your salvation, that the God of the universe—instead of leaving you in your sin—went on an all-out rescue mission to find you? Mercy came running and it has set you free.

Let us never grow weary in worshiping God for what He has done. My anthem is all about Jesus, Who found me when I was lost, Who brought me back when I went astray. My life, energy and focus from this day on will be the worship, adoration of and service to that God. Amen? Are we rejoicing in our own rescue?

Have you repented and returned to the fold?

Jesus brings His story to a head by telling us that the joy the shepherd felt is the same joy the angelic hosts feel when one sinner repents. This begs two questions: are you a sinner? And have you repented? The answer to the first question is yes. All of us have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23).

The more important question is have you repented? That's a big word, one we don't use very often. What does repentance mean? Repentance involves three things.

- First, it requires confession. In this story, it is the confession of the sheep. "I ran away. I went astray and I got lost." Confession involves contrition, which means sorrow. "I'm sorry for wandering, for going my own way. I'm sorry for not doing what I was called to do."
- Repentance also includes the recognition that God is the Good Shepherd Who has come to find, rescue, love and care for us.
- And repentance results in change. "I'm never going to do that again. By Your grace and mercy, Shepherd, I'm never going to wander away again. But I also know that even if I am prone to wander, in Your great love You will come find me."

Our repentance doesn't just take care of one of our sins. We are being saved anew each and every time we wander away, through our disobedience or distraction. God will find us over and over again. Have you repented? I don't want you to leave today without knowing that although you are lost, you can be found by the great and glorious Savior Whose name is Jesus Christ.

You need to realize the depths He went to in order to rescue you. He went to a cross bearing all your burdens, so He could carry you back to the fold. That's the greatness of this story. It's a story that's intended to change us, to remind us of where we've been and where we now are. When we repent, He is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). It is He Who scoops us up in His love and compassion, never to let us go again. That is the great truth of the story of the lost sheep. My prayer is that we will take this truth and apply it to our own lives in the days to come.