

A Welcome Mat for Wanderers

Luke 15:1-7

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Jesus' earthly ministry had a similar theme when it came to His interactions with others. He showed grace to the humble and lowly and pronounced judgment on the lofty and proud. The religious leaders in Jesus' day looked down on others, but Jesus saw them for who they were. And he indiscriminately invited everyone to repentance. And He still does.

More than likely you've spent time hunting for something you've lost: your car keys, the TV remote, some heirloom that you've misplaced. Maybe you're old enough to have hunted all over for your glasses, only to realize you have them on. That's not a happy moment.

If you're a parent of a little one, you've felt that panic when your child suddenly disappears from sight at the store. Your heart races as you look for them; you'd told them to stay with you, not to leave the cart, not to wander off, and you start moving faster and faster down each aisle.

You finally see them in the toy aisle, and you have that sudden mixture of emotions, somewhere between joy and manslaughter, you don't know whether to punish them or hug them. You probably do both.

I read recently of a church on the edge of a small town; the church was about to put on their annual Easter production. Only this year they were excited because they had added into the program two special stars of the show: two sheep; they were being kept in a pen out behind the church.

Trouble is, about an hour before the program was to begin, the sheep somehow got out of the pen and were seen running away. The author wrote, perhaps it was stage fright, who knows?

But off they ran toward town. The play's director, Sandy Mussman, along with her two children, ran after them. They spotted one running through a back yard where a woman

was sitting in a lawn chair. As they raced past her after the runaway sheep, the woman hollered, “Did I just see what I thought I saw?” Sandy hollered over her shoulder, “Yes, a sheep escaped from the church!”

Eventually the church’s pastor joined in the chase.

Everybody in town knew him, and when they asked him what he was looking for, he’d say, “A lost sheep.” And they’d all hang their heads. “No,” he’d say, “a real one.”

Eventually they tracked down one of the sheep near the Community College, they never found the other one. But the show had to go on.

Which seemed perfectly fitting because the opening act was entitled, “The Lost Sheep.”

Adapted from The Associated Press (8-22-2020); citation: www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2003/october/14624.html

Well, that also happens to be the title of one of the most famous parables ever told by the Lord Jesus.

If you have a copy of the New Testament, we are now at chapter 15 in our study of the Gospel of Luke. Chapter 15 is perhaps one of the most well-known chapters in the Bible.

In this chapter, Jesus will tell three parables about losing something valuable: losing a sheep, losing a coin, and losing a son.

The word **“lost”** will show up eight different times in this chapter as Jesus delivers these parables.

By the way, the word **“parable”** means “to place alongside.” In other words, what Jesus will do, as He often does, is tell an earthly story, but place alongside it an eternal principle.

Now before we get into the first parable, Luke sets the stage here by telling us that we’ve got some drama going on backstage, so to speak.

Luke writes here in verse 1:

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

Luke 15:1-2

Pharisees were the religious leaders of the day and scribes were Jewish attorneys who specialized in interpreting the law of Moses.

And they're upset here. Jesus is receiving sinners. The verb here for **receives** is present tense, indicating a pattern. It means He's always welcoming them, even eating meals with them regularly.

David E. Garland, *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Luke* (Zondervan, 2011), p. 612

He's put a welcome mat out for wanderers like tax collectors and sinners.

And that's great news by the way because that means sinners like you and me can come to Him as well.

Now the religious leaders have already expressed how upset they are that Jesus is eating with tax collectors and sinners back in Luke chapter 5.

And they're going to complain again when Jesus comes out of the house of Zacchaeus, a notorious tax collector, just ahead in **chapter 19**, and Jesus answers their objections with this good news: ***"I have come to seek and to save those who are lost" (Luke 19:10).***

Let me ask you a question: have you ever admitted to God that you're lost? You cannot be saved by Jesus Christ until you admit to Him that you're a lost sinner in need of salvation.

I've met a lot of people who aren't saved because they simply will not admit they're sinners, that they're lost and spiritually wandering in need of a Shepherd who can save them. They don't think they need saving!

Well, the Pharisees and scribes felt the same way; they are not lost sheep in their opinion. Of course, they have no trouble seeing tax collectors as lost sheep.

Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Courageous* (Victor Books, 1989), p. 22

And they're not alone; the rest of the Jewish community felt the same way about tax collectors.

During the days of Christ, to say the word "tax collector" was to say "thief." They were one and the same!

R. Albert Mohler, Jr. *Tell Me the Stories of Jesus* (Nelson Books, 2022), p. 65

Tax collectors were Jewish men turned traitors. They had effectively sold their souls to the Roman government for the right to turn around and tax their fellow Jews.

They set up local franchises, inflated the tax rates, skimmed off the top and lived affluent lives at the expense of making their own people poor.

Ibid

Cicero, the Roman statesman who lived 50 years before the birth of Christ, once insulted his political opponent by calling him a tax-collector; and he said to him, like a tax collector

“you ransack every man’s house, entangle men engaged in business with your unjust demands and you terrify the merchants.”

R. Kent Hughes, Luke: Volume Two (Crossway Books, 1998), p. 133

We think of the mafia today like the people in Christ’s day thought of the tax collector.

And by the way, Jesus isn’t arguing here with the fact that the Pharisees are calling them sinners. Jesus never defends their extortion; He isn’t defending their sin. He’s not accommodating their evil.

He’s got the welcome mat out here; He’s about to place, alongside an earthly story, the eternal principle that no-one is beyond the reach of God. No sinner is beyond the grace of God.

And this infuriates the Pharisees because they’ve been teaching the people “there is joy before God when sinners perish from the world.” They believed God *withdrew* from sinners, but Jesus is welcoming sinners—so He’s obviously not related to God.

They were teaching that there is joy with God when sinners die; Jesus is about to teach that there is joy with God when sinners repent.

So don’t misunderstand, like they did, Jesus isn’t sanitizing their lifestyles; He’s not ignoring their lifestyles of deception.

He’s put the welcome mat out, not so they can influence Him, but so that He can influence them.

In the mind of Jesus, all of them—religious leaders and tax collectors and sinners alike—are lost, no matter what they thought about themselves, or what they might have been called by others.

Jesus knew who they were.

Reminds me of two brothers, well known in their town for their crooked business dealings and underworld connections. But when the younger brother died, suddenly, the older brother wanted to give him a funeral fit for a king. He called the funeral director and made all the most expensive arrangements. Then he called the town’s most prominent minister and made him an offer; he said to the pastor, “I’ll give you \$100,000 dollars to put that new roof on the church that I’ve heard you all need, but only if you speak at my younger brother’s funeral and give the eulogy and at some point in your eulogy, you tell everyone my brother was a saint.” To his surprise the minister agreed. The whole town turned out for the funeral, wondering what the minister could possibly say about this notorious criminal. The pastor began, by saying, “The man you see in the coffin before us was a liar, a thief, a reprobate, and a deceiver. He destroyed the fortunes of countless people in this city, some

of whom are here today. This man did every dirty, rotten thing you can think of. He was a vile man; but compared to his older brother, he was a saint.”

Robert J. Morgan, *Stories, Illustrations and Quotes* (Nelson Books,

It doesn't matter what's in your eulogy; it doesn't matter what you think of yourself; it doesn't matter what people call you or think of you, Jesus knows everything about you.

And let me tell you: the only person today with any shred of hope before God is the person who recognizes at some point in their lives that they are lost and sinful and wandering and in need of being found by the Shepherd.

That's the eternal truth alongside this earthly story—this parable that Jesus now delivers. So, let's listen to it here in **verse 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?”

Luke 15:4

They all immediately got the urgency of this story!

No shepherd ever said, “Well, you win some, and you lose some!”

Garland, p. 613

Tough luck; not hardly.

The shepherds in Judea lived difficult, rugged, and often dangerous lives. Pastureland was scarce; the narrow central plateau was only a few miles wide, and it ran down to steep cliffs. The sheep could easily wander.

Adapted from William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke* (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 200

One hundred sheep would have been a relatively large flock and more than one shepherd would have been involved here, though only one is mentioned.

At night when the sheep were brought into some kind of crude outdoor enclosure, typically made of rock piled up to create walls, the shepherds would guide the sheep through an opening, one by one, and they would be counted.

But they would also pass under the shepherd's rod for inspection. A shepherd would use his rod to part the wool and take a closer look for bruises or scrapes or signs of skin disease or parasites.

A sheep's heavy coat of wool had the ability to hide problems or defects.

Today at sheep shows, the wool of a sheep can be expertly clipped and shaped to make the sheep appear to be heavier or stronger; and so the judge has a small wand—like a shepherd’s rod—and they part the wool to get a more realistic viewpoint.

We use the phrase to this day of “trying to pull the wool over someone’s eyes.”

That comes from the world of shepherding.

So, the shepherd used his rod to find ways to care for the sheep but also to keep count of the sheep, and this evening, Jesus says, he counted only 99.

One is missing.

Jesus says here that he left the 99 in the open country, meaning he would have left them in the care of another shepherd. If he hadn’t, he’d be missing 99 more sheep by daybreak.

Off he goes to find this wandering sheep. I have read that these shepherds were experts at tracking and could follow the sheep’s hoof prints for miles. This was not unusual work for a committed shepherd.

Ibid

Their commitment was critical for the life of this wandering sheep.

Sheep do not have the instinctive ability to find their way back should they get lost. They don’t have a sense of smell to find water or food, much less the flock they wander away from.

They are utterly dependent on being saved by their shepherd.

Timothy Laniak wrote in his wonderful journal of experiences he had as he traveled for a year with Bedouin shepherds in the Middle East.

He writes, “Even the hardy mountain breed with which I worked was susceptible to pneumonia, pasturella, hypothermia in the winter, scab and scrapie in the summer. They ignorantly push their heads through fences and get cut or stuck; they try to climb trees to pick at foliage and get their legs caught; they fall down embankments, get bitten by snakes and stung by wasps. They gorge themselves on sour leaves and swell up like balloons; they starve, freeze, and fall ill, but every affliction they face is countered by a good shepherd.”

Timothy Laniak, [While Shepherds Watch Their Flocks](#) (ShepherdLeader Publications, 2007), p. 65

In other words, you’d better be following a good shepherd.

The average person out there on the street will tell me how important their doctor is and their prescription is. “Do you know who my doctor is?”

Do you know who your shepherd is?

The kind of shepherd you need is the one here in Luke 15; we're told here in **verse 4** that He will go after the one that is lost until he finds it.

Are you lost today? That means He's looking for you today.

And by the way, in the days of these religious leaders, there was the concept theologically that God would welcome a repentant sinner, but there was absolutely *no* concept in their thinking that God would go *searching* for a sinner.

This was an incredible revelation of what Jesus meant when he said, ***"I have come to seek and to save those who are lost"* (Luke 19:10).**

You want to hear a deeper theological truth? If you're saved today, it isn't because you found Him, it's because He found you.

And notice what this shepherd does here in **verse 5**:

"And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing."

Luke 15:5

As if to suggest that when *the* Shepherd takes you home to heaven, it isn't going to be by your strength, but His. It will not be by the power of your two feet, but His.

He will carry you home.

Jesus is effectively fulfilling the promise King David once prayed, back in ***Psalm 28 "Lord . . . save your people and be their Shepherd and carry them forever"* (Psalm 28:8-9).**

When does Jesus become your Shepherd? When He becomes your Savior.

And He becomes your Savior when you admit you need saving, that you're a sinner and you trust Him to pay for your sins on His cross and you call upon the Lord. The apostle Paul writes, ***"Whoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved"* (Romans 10:13).**

And when that happens, and you're safely on His shoulders, a party actually begins in heaven.

Notice verse 6:

"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.'

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.”

Luke 15:6-7

Look down at verse 10:

“Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Luke 15:10

Jesus moves beyond His parable to deliver new revelation; He said twice here: **“I tell you”**; let me give you a peek behind the curtain into heaven: there is rejoicing in heaven at the conversion of every sinner.

How does Jesus know that? How could He possibly know this unless He is indeed the preexistent Son of God, unless He is indeed, as **John 3:13** declares, **“The one who came down from Heaven.”?**

Dale Ralph Davis, [Luke: The Year of the Lord's Favor](#) (Christian Focus, 2021), p. 32

This is a glimpse into heaven, and the joyful celebration that begins when a sinner is saved; when someone who was lost is found.

Are you that wandering sheep today? Are you that sinner? Then you qualify to claim Him as your Shepherd.

David Roper wrote for Our Daily Bread one particular devotional about a woman named Edith. He met her one day and she told him about how she came to faith in Christ. She didn't care at all about God or religion, she said, but one Sunday morning she was struggling with inner discontent about life; she felt hopeless and helpless. She decided to go to a church near her apartment, and that Sunday morning the text for the day was Luke 15.

The pastor got up and read from the King James version verses 1 and 2. He got to the end of verse two and read what it said, “This man receiveth sinners and eateth with them.” But here's the way Edith heard it, “This man receiveth sinners and Edith with them.” She sat upright in her pew and eventually figured out what happened. But the Lord began that day to work in her the gospel that she was a lost sheep, and Jesus offered to become her Shepherd.

Adapted from Davis, p. 31

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