

It's 2020! May God give us 20-20 spiritual vision to see His will for us this year. We never really know what tomorrow will bring, but we do know the One who holds tomorrow in His hands. Whatever He brings our way, He will walk with us through it, or if need be, He will carry us through it (1 Corinthians 10:13ⁱ; Isaiah 40:11ⁱⁱ). Amen?

I don't believe there are mere coincidences (1 Timothy 6:15ⁱⁱⁱ). We came to last week's passage on putting Jesus first and this week's portion of Scripture at the beginning of the year because God ordained it so. I certainly didn't plan it. I don't lay out my year of preaching in advance like some pastors do. We just go through the Scriptures from one passage to the next. Last week we saw that Jesus must be our first love, our priority in life, and now in Luke 15, Jesus defends His association with sinners. I believe that we can learn from this passage how to engage the culture while being completely dedicated to God.

This chapter is the parables of the lost things. It is called **the heart of the third Gospel** as it is the focus of Luke's theme of God's love for lost sinners. The parables increase in value from one in one hundred to one in ten to one of two. By telling it in this order, Jesus wanted people to see the great value God places on every human soul. God loves the bride of the Son no matter how fallen she becomes, as was demonstrated in the life of Hosea (Hosea 11:8^{iv}). He kept taking her back, knowing that the clearer she sees her ingratitude and failures, the more she would appreciate grace and redemption (7:47^v).

¹ Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." Luke 15:1,2 What does this tell us about Jesus and the way He proclaimed God's message? Tax collectors were the most despised Jews in Israel for they worked for the Romans. "Sinners" refers to those Jews who made no attempt to keep the many laws that the religious establishment considered necessary to please God. Why would these particular people be drawing near to Jesus? In our culture we would see these people as anyone who has rejected Christianity or those who have accepted a false religion. Are they drawing near to us? I believe we should carefully consider this.

One of Jesus' disciples had been a tax collector. That must have piqued the interest of other tax collectors as to what kind of rabbi would invite one of them to be a disciple. The Pharisees saw this as a reason to condemn Jesus. They avoided the touch of these people and tried to keep their distance from them. A Midrash points out that rabbis would not associate with such persons even to teach them the Law.^{vi} They saw them as unredeemable deplorables. They assumed that just to associate with them meant you had things in common with them. To eat with them meant fellowship. They could not understand how a godly person would associate with people like that. They also believed that by ingesting something they touched, one might take in their sin. The parables that follow not only tell the crowd how precious they are to God, but also tell the Pharisees how different their attitude is from God's attitude toward those people.

Our post-Christian culture has long ago abandoned Christian ideology. Christians are now seen as the imperialists who want to force everyone to conform to a restrictive outdated way of life. We are viewed in a way that is very similar to how the Jewish

“sinners” looked on the Pharisees. Either we are seen as having some impossible standard to keep or as nut jobs who want to take away freedoms through invasive laws that make people miserable - holdovers from a disproven worldview.

So how did Jesus, who perfectly lived the Law, appear so attractive to common persons who refused to conform to the religious regulations? And how do we who believe the Bible and love Jesus acquire His kind of attraction to our neighbors, co-workers, and family who pity us for what they believe are our pleasure stifling beliefs? Let’s observe Jesus’ attractiveness in the parables that follow.

³ *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?”* Luke 15:3,4 Jesus’ parables always have something people can relate to. We must speak to those who do not believe in terms they can understand. That requires deliberate thought. Those people knew the value of one sheep. They also knew the extent a shepherd would go to keep from losing one. It might be his wages for that whole season. But there is another reason. Shepherds get to know their sheep. They give them names. They become attached to some degree so that they genuinely care for their safety. If one has wandered off, he will search for it, even leaving the other sheep behind to do so. Jesus was presenting God’s love for them in a way that they had heard in Scripture but never seen coming from the religious leaders (Ezekiel 34:6^{vii}).

There is only one breed of sheep on an island off the coast of England that care for themselves. They have no predators and can't wonder too far. There are no strong river currents or noxious weeds on that island. Interestingly, they are called Jacob's Sheep. All other sheep need a shepherd. They are very dumb animals and somewhat smelly too. When crossing a river, their wet wool can weigh them down and drown them. That is why in Psalm 23 they are led beside still waters (Psalm 23:2^{viii}).

When David says that the Lord is his shepherd (Psalm 23:1^{ix}), he is not flattering himself. Rather, he is acknowledging how needy he is and how faithful God is to care for him. God directs us away from poisonous weeds of sin. He leads us beside still waters and restores our souls when we need that restoration. He guides us to the good pastures of His Word. And when we stray, and Isaiah 53 says we all go astray (Isaiah 53:6^x), He comes looking for us to bring us back to the fold (Ezekiel 34:11^{xi}). Sheep don't do well on their own. Even on that British isle, they need to be sheared. The danger of isolation is a lesson too many of today's Christians are learning the hard way. We need the flock of believers. There is safety in the company of other sheep (Hebrews 10:25^{xii}).

The shepherd often finds a lost sheep is desperate to return and is bleating but doesn't know the way or is stuck in an area where it can't climb out. The bleating is like our prayers for God to come and rescue us from our folly. But the bleating also tells the wolf there is an easy meal. Thankfully, our Shepherd has a rod and staff and will get there before the wolf when we call out to Him (Psalm 23:4^{xiii}).

⁵ *And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing.* Luke 15:5 The shepherd is so glad to find his sheep that he rejoices and carries it back to the flock. Jesus took this thought right from the Scriptures correcting the false impression of God that the Pharisees were conveying. *"Save your people and bless your inheritance; be their*

shepherd and carry them forever" (Psalm 28:9). I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you" (Isaiah 46:4).

This is the nice version of what is probably the first time the sheep has wandered. If it is the second or third time, the shepherd would break the sheep's leg, and then carry it for the next six weeks while feeding it by hand until its leg mended. That was quite an investment in time and energy done out of love. When that sheep has recovered it will never leave the shepherd's side. The shepherd then puts a bell on it. The other sheep follow the bell's sound because they know that is where the shepherd is (John 10:4^{xiv}).

Some of us have experienced this, and probably many of those who were listening to Jesus had as well. At first, we thought the Shepherd was being harsh. How could He do such a thing to us? But then as He carries us while we heal and feeds us (Hosea 6:1^{xv}). We find the painful experience was His grace to teach us not to wander. We love Him for the grace and tender mercy He has shown us, and we want to stay near Him. Some of those who have had this experience become spiritual bellwethers. The ringing of their bell continually proclaims to others that the Great Shepherd is here.

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.' Luke 15:6 The shepherd is so happy not to have found a torn carcass but instead a whole unharmed sheep. He tells his friends and neighbors about the joy he is experiencing. He wants them to share that joy with him. His lost sheep was found!

⁷ 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 15:7 And that is how loved and valued we sinners are to God (Luke 19:10)! Every redeemed soul is safely in the fold. But when one wanders off and is found and brought back, there is a party in heaven. The joy is shared by all of heaven. Next time you hear of a soul saved or one who has wandered returned, think of what is going on up there in the heavenlies, and share some of that joy! I'm not a very good evangelist, but when I have that great privilege of leading someone to Christ, I always cry tears of joy. I think of a soul snatched out of the wolf's mouth and destined for eternity in the presence of our Savior. It is joy unspeakable and full of glory!

Jesus' first of three answers to the grumbling attitude of the Pharisees was a rebuke to them right out of the prophet Ezekiel's writings (Ezekiel 34:2-4^{xvi}). Not only did it declare that they were bad shepherds, but it also showed that Jesus as the Son of David was the Good Shepherd acting as God gathering His lost sheep (Ezekiel 34:12^{xvii}). Jesus has God's heart and demonstrated it by seeking out those who had wandered.

The oldest statue in Christendom comes from the third century catacombs. It is of a shepherd carrying a sheep on his shoulders. It has been said that the most memorable feature of the statue is the sweetness of the shepherd's face. He is full of joy and satisfaction that his lost sheep has been found. That is how our Great Shepherd felt when you and I came into the fold. He treats our wounds with the balm that comes from His own wounds. He carries us and our burdens on His shoulders. And when necessary, He even afflicts us so that we will not wander again (Isaiah 30:26^{xviii}). But during that affliction we are fed by His hand. The parable was a blast of rebuke to the religious

hypocrites, but it was and is today a sweet song of love to those who know how helpless we truly are.

That was a parable of one out of a hundred. Even one among so many is valued. You are one out of billions, but the Great Shepherd cares for you as much as He does all others. Now we move to one out of ten. ⁸ *“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?”* Luke 15:8 These coins may refer to a wedding necklace, part of the dowry that was included in the bride price. It was meant to sustain her or the family in a time of emergency. But it was also something like the wedding ring of today. It had sentimental value. If one coin detached and was lost, it appeared as if the family had financial trouble. It would take a day’s wages to replace it.

Jewish homes had packed earthen floors. Sometimes these floors were covered with straw to keep the dust down. If a coin was lost on the floor it could be very difficult to find. The houses were also dark with just the light from the doorway. Realizing one of the coins had come loose and fallen out, the woman set about to find it by lighting a lamp and sweeping the floor.

The LORD knows we are lost and considers us a missing part of the bride of Christ. He lit a lamp, the Lord Jesus, the light of the world (John 8:12^{xix}). He sweeps away the things in our lives that would come between us and Him. And when He finds us, He rejoices.

⁹ *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.’* ¹⁰ *Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”* Luke 15:9,10 The shepherd said, *“I have found my sheep that was lost.”* The woman says, *“I have found the coin that I lost.”* Each invited others to share their joy. Both parables end with the joy in heaven over the sinner who repents. The lost coin parable tells us that this joy is in the sight of the angels when one sinner repents (Isaiah 62:5^{xx}). It is the joy of the Father that the angels are invited to share when the lost are found. When one turns from the world to Jesus, repenting of their sins, and accepted His salvation, God rejoices! That is hard to imagine that the Creator of the universe would actually be filled with joy at our salvation, but that reveals how much He loves and cares for us.

The next parable tells us that heaven throws a big celebration when the lost comes home. Listen to how the prophet Zephaniah saw it. Zephaniah 3:17 tells us 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.* This is the God we serve! The Pharisees of Jesus’ day thought that God welcomed repentance, but they never saw Him as seeking out the lost as Jesus was doing. This was a strange concept to them, though it is plainly scriptural. God is a God of compassion and love who deeply cares about each soul. He is not willing that any should perish (2 Peter 3:9^{xxi}), but He will not force His love on us or violate our will. He is also a God who sings and rejoices when we come to our senses and realize He has so much more to offer us than do the things of His creation (15:17^{xxii}).

I hope everyone here this morning can sing of the sweet sound of amazing grace. We once were lost, but now we are found. We were blind, but now we see! We see that

God loves us, that His ways are best, that the deepest desires of our hearts find their fulfillment in Him. The Shepherd found us bleating for help and carried us home.

Can you see in these parables the winsomeness of Jesus? He didn't hide the fact that they had strayed from God or that they were lost, but He didn't do it by wagging His finger at them or by telling them how evil they were. He didn't distance Himself from them like the Pharisees did. He was right there with them telling them about a God who longed for them to be reconciled to Him (Isaiah 1:18^{xxiii}). **He was the very heart of God on display for them to see how much they were loved.** He is the shepherd searching for the lost sheep, eager to save them from the wolves. He is the one sweeping the house, eager to find the lost coin to make the set complete again.

Those who were hearing Him didn't go away feeling condemned, but rather thinking about the fact that they are loved. That is because Jesus didn't come to condemn the world but to save it (John 3:17^{xxiv}). The truth that each soul is valued and loved is exactly what we need to convey to our post-Christian culture. We need to invite them into our homes and show them the love and grace of Jesus. We never need to compromise our message, but neither do we need to make it offensive so that they are repelled by it. We need the winsome gentleness of Jesus, not the prideful arrogance of the Pharisees.

This means we need to study to be able to wisely answer sincere questions (1 Peter 3:15^{xxv}). We do so not to beat people over the head with facts, but to gently persuade with truth. It means demonstrating sincere love, because we know how much God loves them. It may mean serving in humbling ways, not being doormats, but out of love gladly doing things no one would expect you to do.

One of the things that changed the Roman empire was Christians staying behind to care for the sick when epidemics struck. Now that is showing the love of Christ who gave His life for us (1 John 3:16^{xxvi})! We practice this love and service by allowing God's love to flow through us to one another within God's family (Galatians 6:10^{xxvii}). How can we serve one another and let the love of Jesus be seen in us? In receiving the love of Jesus for us, His love in us reaches out to others. By staying close to His side, we call others to follow Him. We take His yoke upon us and learn from Him (Matthew 11:29^{xxviii}). This is the challenge the Scriptures have put before us as we start the new year: Make Jesus our primary love and motivation while letting His love flow through us to the lost as we gracefully showing them His loving desire to rescue them.

Questions

- 1 Why is this chapter called the heart of Luke's Gospel?
- 2 What was the Pharisees complaint?
- 3 How does our culture view Christians?
- 4 What did the first parable tell them about their condition?
- 5 What did it tell them about God's love?
- 6 Why would the shepherd break a sheep's leg?
- 7 What happens in heaven when a soul is rescued?
- 8 What does the next parable reiterate God's heart for the lost?
- 9 How did Jesus' teaching style attract sinners to Himself?

10 How can we attract sinners like Jesus did?

ⁱ **1 Corinthians 10:13 (ESV)**

¹³ No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

ⁱⁱ **Isaiah 40:11 (ESV)**

¹¹ He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.

ⁱⁱⁱ **1 Timothy 6:15 (ESV)**

¹⁵ which he will display at the proper time—he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords,

^{iv} **Hosea 11:8 (ESV)**

⁸ How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender.

^v **Luke 7:47 (ESV)**

⁴⁷ Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little.”

^{vi} (Midrash Mek. Amalek 3 on Ex.18:1)

^{vii} **Ezekiel 34:6 (ESV)**

⁶ My sheep were scattered; they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them.

^{viii} **Psalms 23:2 (ESV)**

² He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters.

^{ix} **Psalms 23:1 (ESV)**

¹ The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

^x **Isaiah 53:6 (ESV)**

⁶ All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

^{xi} **Ezekiel 34:11 (ESV)**

¹¹ “For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out.

^{xii} **Hebrews 10:25 (ESV)**

²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

^{xiii} **Psalms 23:4 (ESV)**

⁴ Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

^{xiv} **John 10:4 (ESV)**

⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.

^{xv} **Hosea 6:1 (ESV)**

¹ “Come, let us return to the LORD; for he has torn us, that he may heal us; he has struck us down, and he will bind us up.

^{xvi} **Ezekiel 34:2-4 (ESV)**

² “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? ³ You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. ⁴ The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them.

^{xvii} **Ezekiel 34:12 (ESV)**

¹² As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.

^{xviii} **Isaiah 30:26 (ESV)**

²⁶ Moreover, the light of the moon will be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be sevenfold, as the light of seven days, in the day when the LORD binds up the brokenness of his people, and heals the wounds inflicted by his blow.

^{xix} **John 8:12 (ESV)**

¹² Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

^{xx} **Isaiah 62:5 (ESV)**

⁵ 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.

^{xxi} **2 Peter 3:9 (ESV)**

⁹ The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

^{xxii} **Luke 15:17 (ESV)**

¹⁷ "But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger!'

^{xxiii} **Isaiah 1:18 (ESV)**

¹⁸ "Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.

^{xxiv} **John 3:17 (ESV)**

¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

^{xxv} **1 Peter 3:15 (ESV)**

¹⁵ but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect,

^{xxvi} **1 John 3:16 (ESV)**

¹⁶ By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.

^{xxvii} **Galatians 6:10 (ESV)**

¹⁰ So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.

^{xxviii} **Matthew 11:29 (ESV)**

²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.