

To Seek and To Save the Lost

The Parable of the Lost Sheep

Luke 15:4-7

Rev. Freddy Fritz

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Scripture

In our study in *The Gospel of Luke* we are now in chapter 15. Jesus was reaching the tax collectors and sinners with the good news of salvation. This infuriated the Pharisees and the scribes. Luke 15 is Jesus' reply to the Pharisees and the scribes. It is a marvelous illustration of the good news of the gospel.

In fact, commentator William Barclay puts it this way:

There is no chapter of the New Testament so well known and so dearly loved as the fifteenth chapter of Luke's gospel. It has been called "the gospel in the gospel," as if it contained the very distilled essence of the good news which Jesus came to tell.¹

Let's read the parable of the lost sheep in Luke 15:4-7, although, for the sake of context, I shall begin with verses 1-3:

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."

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? ⁵ And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. 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.' 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 15:4-7)**

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 236.

Introduction

Psalm 23 was written by David, and is the best-known psalm in the entire Bible. David realized that the loving care he gave his sheep was like the loving care he received from God. So, David began his famous psalm with these words, “The Lord is *my* shepherd” (Psalm 23:1). Then he listed all the things that his shepherd did for him: lying him down in green pastures, leading him beside still waters, restoring his soul, walking with him through the valley of the shadow of death, preparing a table of food for him, anointing his head with soothing oil, filling his cup with overflowing joy, and the sure promise of dwelling with God forever.

We love Psalm 23. So did God’s people throughout history. As commentator Philip Ryken says, “The shepherd from David’s psalm became part of Israel’s working definition of God.”²

God was viewed as the perfect shepherd of his people. So, whenever the people of God got into trouble – which was often! – they would pray the words of Psalm 80:1, 3, “Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock . . . Restore us, O God; . . . that we may be saved!”

The prophets of Israel pictured God as a good shepherd. For example, Isaiah emphasized God’s loving care for his smallest sheep. He said in Isaiah 40:11, “He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom.”

God entrusted the work of shepherding to under-shepherds. However, they were not always good under-shepherds to the people of God. God accused the under-shepherds of scattering his flock through Jeremiah, “You have

² Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, vol. 2, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 101.

scattered my flock and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them” (23:2). God’s criticism through Ezekiel was even stronger, “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 My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them” (34:4, 6).

According to God’s prophets, God’s sheep were lost. But the prophets also proclaimed God’s remedy: the Good Shepherd himself would come to seek and to save the lost (cf. Luke 19:10). Ezekiel proclaimed this message from God, “Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. 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” (34:11-12). God made a similar promise through Jeremiah, and said that the shepherd who would save his people would be the son of David (cf. Jeremiah 23:3, 5).

The Pharisees and the scribes were familiar with the motif of God as a shepherd and the people as his sheep. They understood that they were the spiritual under-shepherds of Israel. But they did not understand that Jesus was the Good Shepherd whom God had sent to seek and to save the lost sheep.

Worse yet, the Pharisees and the scribes did not realize that they were part of the problem. Rather than providing loving care for God’s people, they were in fact misleading them. They were furious when Jesus associated with people like tax collectors and sinners. Luke said in Luke 15:1-2, “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.’ ”

The tax collectors and sinners were spiritual outcasts. They did not seem to have any interest in God or the things of God. They did not worship God or participate in the life of the

worshiping community. They were irreligious people.

But, because they were made in the image of God, they were spiritual beings. And when Jesus came along, his message resonated with them. They wanted to know how they could come into a right relationship with God. And Jesus constantly told them that entrance into the kingdom of God was through faith in him and repentance from sin.

The religious people of that day, the Pharisees and the scribes, wanted no contact whatsoever with irreligious people. They believed that any contact with irreligious people would contaminate them. As far as the religious Pharisees and the scribes were concerned, the tax collectors and sinners, were outside of Israel, outside of the faith, and outside of God. Sadly, we who are part of Jesus' church today sometimes have the same attitude toward those who are irreligious.

But, as far as Jesus was concerned, the plight of the irreligious, the spiritual outcasts, the lost sheep of Israel – the very people that Israel's under-shepherds were supposed to rescue – were those whom he had come to seek and to save. So, the tax collectors and sinners were the people with whom Jesus *ought* to be eating.

Kenneth E. Bailey is a Presbyterian scholar who lived and taught in the Middle East. I shall be drawing heavily from his various books regarding the parables of Jesus. He summarizes the response that Jesus gave his critics:

You wonder why I receive sinners and eat with them? I do so because in my person God is fulfilling his great promise hinted at in David's shepherd psalm and spelled out clearly in Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Through those prophets he pledged himself to come in person and round up the lost sheep. He also pledged himself to rescue the flock from the shepherds who destroy them. This is who I am, and this is why I do what I do.³

³ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jacob and the Prodigal: How Jesus Retold Israel's Story* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 69.

Jesus did not say this directly, of course. He said it by telling the Pharisees and the scribes a parable. The parable began with Jesus as the Good Shepherd who finds the lost sheep.

Jesus' parable really has three parts, even though we tend to call each part a separate parable. Luke said in verse 3, "So he [that is, Jesus] told them *this parable*." The parable runs all the way to the end of chapter 15, and includes the story of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son (although we shall see that both sons were actually lost).

All three parts of the parable make the same basic point. In each story something is lost, sought, found, and celebrated.

According to Michael Wilcock, "The plain meaning of the chapter is that just as there is joy when any shepherd or any housewife or any father recovers a loss, so there is joy in heaven when a sinner is reunited with God."⁴

Philip Ryken expresses it this way, "This three-in-one parable is about the joy of God in finding what is lost – a joy that we will share only if we have the heart that Jesus has for lost and dying sinners."⁵

So, the first part of the parable is about a lost sheep that the shepherd seeks, finds, and rejoices over its recovery.

Lesson

The analysis of the lost sheep in Luke 15:4-7 teaches us that there is joy in heaven over every sinner who repents.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The Shepherd's Search (15:4)
2. The Shepherd's Success (15:5)
3. The Shepherd's Celebration (15:6-7)

⁴ Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Luke*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979), 149-150.

⁵ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, vol. 2, 104.

I. The Shepherd's Search (15:4)

First, let's look at the shepherd's search.

Jesus began the parable by saying 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?”**

Kenneth E. Bailey has written extensively about the culture that most likely existed in Jesus' day. It is necessary to understand the cultural background to interpret the parable correctly. Bailey points out that the context for this part of the parable seems to be a village community. There were perhaps a few hundred people living together in the village and they were deeply connected as a community.

A man **having a hundred sheep** in that culture was wealthy. He probably hired a family member to take care of the flock. Bailey says,

The extended family owns the sheep. The shepherd is not a “hireling” nor a “stranger.” He is a member of the extended family and naturally feels responsible before the entire family clan; any loss is a loss to all of them. This understanding of the culture clarifies the joy in the *community* reflected at the center of the parable. In short, the extended family loses if a sheep is lost; the whole clan rejoices if the lost is found.⁶

So, the owner **lost one of** his sheep. Jesus did not say what caused the sheep to get lost. Lost sheep are easily disoriented when they are lost. They are defenseless against danger. And they do not find their way home by themselves. All they can do is wait for the shepherd to rescue them.

Is this not a picture of our own spiritual condition? Apart

⁶ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet & Peasant*, 148.

from Christ, we are lost. We are defenseless against spiritual danger. And we cannot find our way to God by ourselves. All we can do is to wait for Jesus to rescue us.

Of course, the shepherd goes **after the one that is lost, until he finds it**. That is a beautiful picture of what Jesus does, isn't it? Like the shepherd in this parable, Jesus came to earth to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10). As Philip Ryken says, "When we are lost, when we have wandered on the far hills of disobedience, when we are alone and afraid, when we are wounded and weak, when we are defenseless against our enemies, when we are unable to save ourselves – it is just then that Jesus comes to rescue us."⁷ And, of course, Jesus seeks and finds every single lost sheep of his.

The fact that the shepherd seeks and finds the one that is lost gives immense security and comfort to the rest of the flock, **the ninety-nine in the open country**. After all, one could reason that the loss of one sheep out of a hundred is only a 1% loss. A wealthy man easily handles that loss. But if the shepherd had such a cavalier disregard for the loss of one sheep, what comfort would that give to **the ninety-nine**? Kenneth Bailey says,

Indeed, it is the shepherd's willingness to go after the one that gives the ninety-nine their real security. If the one is sacrificed in the name of the larger good of the group, then each individual in the group is insecure, knowing that he or she too is of little value. If lost, he or she will be left to die. When the shepherd pays a high price to find the one, he thereby offers the profoundest security to the many.⁸

Philip Ryken notes Charles Spurgeon's comments.⁹ In his

⁷ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, vol. 2, 105.

⁸ Kenneth E. Bailey, *The Cross and the Prodigal: Luke 15 through the Eyes of Middle Eastern Peasants*, Second Edition. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2005), 31.

⁹ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, vol. 2, 107.

preaching on this parable, Charles Spurgeon imagined the Good Shepherd going out and finding his sheep in a dark glen on the mountainside. But before Jesus can bring them home, Satan tries to stop him.

First the devil tries to say that because the sheep are in the wilderness they belong to him and not to Jesus. But Jesus shows Satan that the sheep have been marked with his blood and therefore they belong to him.

Then the devil tries to wrestle with Jesus in open spiritual combat, but he is defeated.

Next Satan gives up most of the sheep while keeping some of them for himself, but of course Jesus refuses to fall for this trick.

Finally, when Jesus insists that all the sheep must come with him, Satan tries to keep one little lamb for himself.

“This is such a little one,” he says. “This is so weak. Thou wouldst not have such a shriveled, scabby one as this in thy bright flock, thou fair Shepherd of God.”

But Jesus says, “Sooner than lose one of them I will die again, and shed my blood once more to buy it back. All that my Father gave me I will have.”¹⁰

Jesus will find every single lost sheep. Not one will be left in the wilderness. Not one will perish. Is that not encouraging?

II. The Shepherd’s Success (15:5)

Second, observe the shepherd’s success.

Jesus continued in verse 5, **“And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing.”**

The shepherd finds the lost sheep. I had often wondered why the shepherd carried the sheep home on his shoulders. I thought that it was perhaps because they were far from home.

¹⁰ Charles Spurgeon, “Full Redemption,” *The New Park Street Pulpit*, vol. 6 (London, 1861; reprint Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim, 1974), 185.

But that is not why the shepherd carries the sheep. Bailey says, “A lost sheep will lie down helplessly and refuse to budge. The shepherd is forced to carry it over a long distance.”¹¹

The caring shepherd picks up the lost sheep and carries it all the way home. But, instead of doing it grudgingly, he does so **rejoicing!**

What a beautiful picture of Jesus. He finds every lost sheep and carries us all the way home. And he does so rejoicing!

III. The Shepherd’s Celebration (15:6-7)

And finally, notice the shepherd’s celebration. There really is a two-fold celebration.

A. *There Is Celebration on Earth (15:6)*

First, there is celebration on earth.

Jesus said in 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.’**”

The entire village joins in the celebration of the recovery of the lost sheep. The loss of one sheep is not just a loss for the owner, but it is a loss for the entire community. Therefore, the joy of finding the lost sheep is not just joy for the owner finding the lost sheep, but it is joy for the entire community finding the lost sheep.

As a community of God’s people, we should be deeply concerned about lost people. We should pray for the lost, speak to the lost, and evangelize the lost. And when Jesus finds a lost sinner, we should all rejoice that a lost sinner is saved.

¹¹ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet & Peasant*, 148.

B. There Is Celebration in Heaven (15:7)

And second, there is celebration in heaven.

Jesus said in verse 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.”**

Jesus was taking a jab at the Pharisees and the scribes when he said that there are **ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance**. There is no-one righteous, no, not one. So, everyone needs to repent and come to Jesus. Self-righteous Pharisees believe that their own righteousness is meritorious and good enough to get them into heaven. Not so, says Jesus.

But when a sinner repents, all heaven rejoices! Isn't that encouraging?

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the lost sheep in Luke 15:4-7, we should examine ourselves to see if we have truly repented.

One of the signs that we have been found by Jesus is that we repent of our sin. A lost sinner is in the wilderness of this world and may be unaware of the danger that is all about. A lost sinner is truly without hope. But when Jesus finds lost sinners and brings us safely home, we turn from our own ways and do whatever he commands. Jesus is the Good Shepherd and, having been found by him, our great desire is to repent of our sin and live for him. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

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Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

Answers for Life!

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org

Web site: www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org

PRAYER:

Our Father, thank you for the parable of Jesus in Luke 15 that begins with the lost sheep. Thank you for the joy of Jesus for the salvation of the lost.

If there is anyone here today who is still lost, will you grant that person faith and repentance? Will you save that lost person?

And will you enable all of us who are no longer lost to tell others about Jesus and the salvation that can be found only in him. And may we rejoice with all heaven at the salvation of every lost person.

And for this I pray in your name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!