

Sermon: The Importance of One

Text: Luke 15:1-10

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Introduction: Depending on who you are and one's relationship to God, a person will understand Jesus' parables in a variety of ways. Many of the parables Jesus taught were shared in different settings with different people. One of the keys to correct interpretation (hermeneutics) is: a person must understand to whom the story is directed.

The entire fifteenth chapter of Luke is about that which is lost being found. It is about a picture of God's open agenda. The gospel writer shares with us the kind of heart God's followers should have. And the text certainly lets us know "The Importance of One."

Let's look at:

I. One Primary Audience Addressed (vv. 1-3)

Luke 15:1-3 (NIV) ¹Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. ²But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." ³Then Jesus told them this parable:

The question comes: to whom did Jesus tell this parable? It seems to me that Jesus' primary audience were the:

A. Pharisees and Teachers of the Law

Like we have discussed, it is easy to negatively portray any group. It is similar to saying all Democrats are liberals or all Baptists are conservatives. There were *good, well-meaning* Pharisees and Teachers of the Law, too, but more and more they had increasingly been antagonistic towards Jesus.

These groups who generally thought of themselves as better than anyone else had very strict rules about God and church. Anyone who did not follow their rules exactly was thought to be far from the kingdom. The Pharisees and teachers found it easy to pass judgment on outsiders as well. These two groups were listening critically, to find fault and even discredit Jesus. They were "grumbling" just like the Israelites of old that refused God and Moses' leadership.

Yet others are listening, too

B. Sinners

This group was made up really of anyone who was not a Pharisee or teacher of the law. You know, the “in-group.” Tax collectors in the NT were often coupled in lists with robbers and thieves, and even in some instances with harlots, adulterers, extortioners, and murderers. In fact, “if tax collectors and publicans had belonged to a Pharasaic community before taking on the office, they were expelled and could not be reinstated until they had given up the posts” (quoted from Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, p. 311).

Yet, these are the very people who were following Jesus, hungry for what he was serving. These are the people who were being brought into the kingdom ahead of the Pharisees. These “sinners” knew they were sick and blind and needed a healing. They recognized the Messiah in their midst.

One has to ask: who are the primary:

C. Hearers

It seems clear to me that in the Lucan account, Jesus is talking to the religious leaders, not so much his disciples like he was in Matthew. And these “so-called” sinners (tax collectors) were hearing Jesus’ teaching because they had “ears to hear.”

Now, one has to ask what is Luke’s interest in relating this teaching to *his* congregation? Could it be that members of the 1st century church had already reverted back to the Pharisees’ approach. You know: “church is for good and decent people only.” Or, if they want to belong here they are going to have to behave much better, and I mean now!

So how should the contemporary church overhear these parables? Could it be we exclude others or think we are better than others? In fact, we might have the same disease that discounts grace and makes people earn it! Jesus not only put up with these sinners, he welcomed them with open arms.

II. One Main Character Defined (vv. 4-10)

The danger of these parables, of course, is to think there only needs to be one responsible person. It is what is technically called “sacerdotalism.” It is where the minister or the priest represents the people to God. This is just the opposite of NT teaching where we are to represent God to people.

These parables were given to provide models of behavior for everyone. Notice how **verse 4** begins:

Luke 15:4-10 (NIV) **“Suppose one of you** has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ⁵And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ ⁷I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent. ⁸“Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? ⁹And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.’ ¹⁰In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

In these twin parables, where much of the detail is similar, you can almost cut and paste the main characters. The first one is a:

A. Shepherd

Traditionally a shepherd had been a picture of God’s care and compassion. The 23rd Psalm immediately comes to mind. Many of the OT heroes had been shepherds: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David.

Over the years this occupation had been denigrated to where those who worked with livestock were considered unclean, unfit to associate with godly folks. Yet, Jesus starts his story saying to the Pharisees: **“Suppose one of you** has 100 sheep.”

A part of what Jesus was saying here is that among the supposed “unclean people” are people that have the same traits as God. God cares about the nation(s), but most certainly also cares about individuals. He sees the importance of one. God will come after the one who is lost. He wants to restore wholeness and provide safety.

Without a shepherd, the sheep will perish. Without God a person is lost and will be excluded from heaven. The wilderness and desert are dangerous places, much like the world without Christ.

And then there is the:

B. Woman

If you thought the Pharisees were offended by being compared to a low-class shepherd, can you imagine what they were feeling being compared to a poor woman? But again, Jesus insists that God is like her in the way she diligently searches for what is lost.

What has she lost? A drachma, the equivalent of a denarius. It had taken a long time to save back a full-day's wages. This may have been part of her dowry. It was everything to her. Some people have money to burn; others save and save to accumulate a little. Like God's view of us, we are worth every effort he may expend to find us.

In both stories we see friends and neighbors as a support cast much like all the members of Christ's Church. They rejoice when God is successful in his mission. The importance of community, being in fellowship with other Christians, is to provide a relationship for celebrating God's success in all our lives. Have you ever tried to have a party by yourself? It doesn't work well, does it?

From the two stories it is clear that there is:

III. One Desired Result Reached

This happens in steps, if you will. The first obvious step is:

A. To Have the Lost Found

The OT prophets understood the scope of the problem. Isaiah tells of a Suffering Servant, Jesus, the Messiah, who would be needed to solve this spiritual dilemma.

Isaiah 53:6 (NIV) ⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Before Jesus Christ, we were all lost. Since we have been saved, it is our responsibility to do *Whatever It Takes* to locate the lost and introduce them to our Savior. Jesus' conduct towards sinners represents God's and suggests ours.

It is our Lord's desire; he wants more than anything:

B. To Have the Lost Repent

A point of theology here: Repentance is most certainly a gift from God, but at the same time it is also the person's responsibility. I cannot make anyone love God. I cannot demand a person's heart changes. I can only encourage and pray that they will want to be found, and be brought back into the fold, and accept the help God offers in this restoration.

Barbara Brown Taylor tells this story: A few summers ago, my husband Ed and I went on a ten day hike in the wilderness with fifteen other people and a trip leader, none of whom we knew ahead of time. We were a motley crew from all over the United States, and as the days passed it became apparent that all walkers are not created equal. Some of us charged ahead while others of us lagged behind, and while we encouraged one another along, we soon learned that we could only travel as fast as our slowest member.

Her name was Pat. She was the eldest member of the group, and the heaviest, and the most unpleasant. She liked to walk alone at the rear of the group which was just as well, since she had an irritating habit of listening in on other people's conversations and then breaking in to correct their grammar, geography, history, botany, or any of the other subjects about which she knew so much. She liked a full hour for lunch and threatened to be sick if she were rushed. Most of the spots our trip leader picked to stop were too sunny, or too wet, or too steep for her, but she would plunk herself down anyway and announce that she would "make do."

Around the fifth day out we got good and lost, walking for close to ten hours over three mountains before we made camp. When we arrived, after dark, in the rain, in the middle of nowhere - Pat was not with us. We compared notes and discovered that no one had seen her since noon, when she had thrown rocks at the person assigned to bring up the rear of the group and told him to leave her alone.

Delighted, he had complied, but that meant no one had seen her for almost eight hours. We were all trembling with exhaustion and soaked to the bone; no one could even imagine heading back up the last mountain in order to find her. But it was the trip leaders' job, so he did it. Armed with hot soup, a jacket, and a first-aid kit, he disappeared into the dark while the rest of us milled around, trying to stay away from the idea of what it would be like to be lost in the wilderness without a match or a map or a friend.

We paced and dozed until close to midnight, when Pat stumbled into camp hanging on to her shepherd. Those of us who had despised her at noon fell over her in the dark, petting her and hugging her and welcoming her home, pressing mugs of hot chocolate into her hands and oatmeal cookies into her pockets. No one thought to ask her if she was going to be a nicer person from now on, or whether she had learned her lesson. We were too glad to have her back. Imagining her out there in the dark, we had all felt more than a little lost ourselves, so finding her was as good as being found.

Pat acted rather nonchalant about the whole thing, if you ask me, but the next morning she was up and dressed and on the trail before any of us, and from that day on she was part of the flock. Not everybody's favorite member, by any means, but part of the flock. Maybe it was getting lost that changed her - although she denied even a moment's fear during her ordeal - but then again, maybe it was being found that did the trick. Maybe it was our welcome home that made the difference, that convinced her she was part of the flock, but at any rate it was hard to separate her repentance from ours, or the repentance from the rejoicing. We all kept better track of each other from then on, and took turns walking with Pat, who surprised everyone by bursting into song one night and leading us all in a medley of old camp tunes. (from *The Preaching Life*, pp. 151-153).

Finally, God's desired result is:

C. To Have Everyone Rejoice

Next week, we will see a bigger picture of this same theme. It is still the story of lost things found. It is a story of repentance, a story of restoration. In our two parables inanimate objects are restored to their owner and in a way back under their supervision. Something similar will happen next week that will be cause for a party.

Luke opened his gospel with rejoicing over a Messiah being born. Here in this 15th chapter he returns to joy in seeing that same Jesus accepted, and sinners found who want to repent, causing all of heaven to celebrate.

Conclusion: In [Luke 15](#), all three parables have main characters that represent God or Jesus Christ. Those who follow Jesus (his disciples) need to be found modeling their lives after him. God's mission should be our mission. [Luke 19:10 \(NIV\)](#) ¹⁰For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."

These are all stories of restoration. It is the ancient story of God's invitation to us and His desire to put right everything that was lost in the fall. These are stories of wholeness brought about by an active seeking of the lost who are willing to repent, be forgiven, and find themselves joyfully accepted back by our gracious Heavenly Father.

It is not just one person's responsibility, but everyone here, to help locate the lost. Jesus wants all of us to put ourselves in his shoes. He said: "suppose one of you..."

There can always be reasons for being negative and critical just like the Pharisees, but as Christians we have an even better reason for being positive and rejoicing. *Everyone* here can make a positive difference in the life of Christ's Church. The question is: will you?

The Importance of One

A young man, walking along the beach at dawn, noticed an old man ahead of him picking up starfish and flinging them into the sea.

Catching up with the man, the youth asked what he was doing. The answer was that the stranded starfish would die if left until the morning sun.

"But the beach goes on for miles, and there are millions of starfish" countered the young man. "How can your effort make any difference?"

The old man looked at the starfish in his hand and then threw it to safety in the waves. "It makes a difference to this one," he said.