

God is pursuing the wayward

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[0 : 0 0] Amen. A few weeks ago, just before Christmas, we met this priest called Zechariah from earlier in Luke's Gospel. And one of the things he showed us was the ever-present danger of becoming much more intimate with our routines than with God himself. Our senses become so dialed to God things, like someone who's had too much wine, that we don't even know it when God shows up.

So as we begin 2019, one of the things that we want to make sure is that we don't fall into that trap. We don't want to just go through the motions. Instead, we want to reorient and enlarge our spiritual vision. And that's a big reason why we're starting off this year with this short sermon series. What in the world is God doing? When someone gets a stroke, one of the symptoms that might result is something called hemianosia, or in layman's terms, visual neglect. Basically, a stroke survivor might walk into a room, see only one side of the room, and think inaccurately that he is seeing the entire room. They are not even aware that they can't see the other side of the room. So they'll need therapy and rehabilitation.

And in this sermon series, we'll be attempting to do some spiritual rehabilitation to correct any deficiencies in our vision. We want to make sure that we can see the big picture of what God is doing. So in the next three weeks, what I'm going to try to do is to take you through the big picture of the Bible, each time starting in Genesis and ending in Revelation. And we're going to trace through three particular things that God is doing. If you got the flyer for our sermon series last week, you can see what they are. And there's still some extra which you can pick up from Yeeley at the back of the hall if you were not around last week. But this morning, we're going to begin answering that question. What in the world is God doing by staying in just one passage, the one you've just heard read out, Luke 15? And it's a familiar passage to many of us, particularly the last parable. If this morning you haven't heard this story before, then you're in for a treat. But many of us would have heard it before. And the danger, of course, is over-familiarity. We've heard this story so many times, perhaps even taught it ourselves in Sunday school or Bible study. But I want to suggest to you this morning that our over-familiarity with this story might actually be preventing us from fully appreciating what's going on. Because we think we know the whole story, we don't bother to look at it closely.

And one reason for that is how this story is commonly known. If you were to look at the heading before Luke 15, verse 11 in your NIV Bibles this morning, it will say, the parable of the lost son.

Now, if you didn't know before, the headings you'll find in your modern Bibles are not part of the original Bible, but given by modern editors. The same title is found in other English translations, like the NLT or the NKJV. The ESV calls it the parable of the prodigal son. And most of us would normally refer to this parable that way. But I want to suggest to you that calling it the parable of the lost or prodigal son is not the best title. For one thing, it immediately pushes us to answer these two questions on the screen a certain way. So the question should come out on the screen.

[4 : 15] Number one, who is this parable mainly about? And number two, who is lost in this parable? Is it appearing on the screen? Anyway, because of the way we've titled this parable, we immediately answer to both questions the younger son. And we read the entire parable through that lens. And when we do so, it's like putting on a pair of glasses with the wrong degrees. It's not so much that you are seeing wrongly. Clearly, the younger son is a key part of the story. But it's more like you're seeing blurrily.

Your focus is misplaced, and you'll miss out on some other elements in the story. Again, it's a bit like the visual neglect I spoke about earlier. We can see half the picture, but not the entire picture. We might get some of the secondary points, but miss the big, sharp point.

So this morning, let me encourage you to just forget that title, the parable of the prodigal son for a moment, and to put on a fresh pair of spectacles with me as we explore what God is saying to us through this parable. And the first thing to recognize is that Jesus doesn't tell this parable in isolation. He actually tells three parables, one after another. So he clearly wants each parable to build upon each other. Luke signals this to us in verse 3 when he writes, then Jesus told them this parable, singular, not plural, and then proceeds instead to tell them three stories. We're meant to think about these little anecdotes about the shepherd, the woman, and this family together. So one good question to immediately ask is, what do they have in common?

What do these stories share? And the first thing we discover is that they are all to do with lostness. So the NIV editors clearly aren't all wrong. Lostness is a key part of the parable.

In verse 4, Jesus describes a situation where a shepherd has a hundred sheep, but has lost one of them. And so verse 4, the shepherd goes after the lost sheep, and in verse 6, he finds this lost sheep.

[7 : 06] And it's exactly the same in the second parable. In verse 8, Jesus describes a situation where a coin has been lost, and in verse 9, the woman says she has found this lost coin. That's the descriptor that's being used again and again. Lostness is in view here. And so when we move into the third parable, Jesus has already prepared us mentally. As soon as we hear the opening lines, there was a man who had two sons.

We are ready to hear more about lost things. And we get it. This is the part we are familiar with, but let me just go over some of the details with you. Jesus plunges us straight into the action in verse 12.

The youngest son said to his father, Father, give me my share of the estate. The youngest son comes, demanding his inheritance.

And what he's really saying to his father is, I wish you were already dead. But since you're not, I can't wait any longer.

He's saying, All I care about is the things that you have that you will give me. I don't care about you. It doesn't matter even if you need some of that property at this current time.

[8 : 40] I want it now. Those from a Middle Eastern background, and I suspect those of us from an Asian background, will have gotten this subtext immediately.

He wants his father dead. His demand would have felt deeply shocking and disrespectful to both Jewish and Greek readers, and probably to us too.

But perhaps just as startling is the fact that the father agrees. To a Middle Eastern audience, that's ridiculous.

He's been dishonoured. He's lost face. What's he going to tell the neighbours? And of course, now he knows how much his youngest son actually loves him.

Not very much at all. Yet he agrees. This only heightens the sense of how utterly lost the younger son is, when he not only gets the inheritance in an utterly shameful way, but proceeds to abandon the family for a far country, verse 13, despite the father's generosity.

[10 : 01] The father now watches as his youngest son empties the savings account, gets on a Malaysia Airlines flight, and throws it all away while living in Bangkok.

So Jesus is painting a vivid picture of lostness. And he's saying, that's us.

Look back again at the previous two parables where Jesus talks about the lost sheep and the lost coin. And each time, in verses 7 and 10, he compares the lost sheep and the lost coin to a sinner.

And he's saying, that's our story. Because we're sinners, we are lost. Like the youngest son, we want the good, beautiful things God has created and stored up for us.

But we didn't want him. We want to live our lives in independence from him rather than intimacy with him. Perhaps we dress this up as a quest to find ourselves.

[11 : 15] But we want to do so on our own terms, not in terms of our relationship to God the Father. So we exile ourselves voluntarily from him, the one for whom we were made.

And when we go off the beaten path like that, we are actually wasting our lives. We simply become more and more lost.

Just look at the youngest son again. Verse 14, a famine strikes and he began to be in need. The funds have dried up. The friends have left.

So, verse 15, he has to start working for a Gentile, a non-Jew. That's humiliating enough for him.

It's equivalent to a Jew working for a German Nazi during World War II. Not only that, he has to get his hands dirty with the pigs.

[12 : 19] That's not just a hygienic issue. It's equivalent to asking a Muslim today to do that job. It's completely at odds with his religion, with the way he was brought up.

Ironically, in his quest to find himself away from his father, he has actually lost his religious identity, his ethnic identity, his family identity.

And notice in verse 16, just how despairing his situation has become. He's envying even the pigs.

The pigs at least get to eat something, but he doesn't. He's distant, he's dirty, he's hungry, and above all, he's unholy.

Jesus says, when you go away from the father, you bring about more issues, not resolve them. That's how it works.

[13 : 27] Lostness equals unholiness. So clearly, this parable has to do with lostness. So far, I think, so familiar, although I hope you still feel the force of it.

But that's not all. Because although the younger son is clearly essential to the story, he's not actually its main focus.

The fact that his loss is actually setting up the true main point of this parable. Let's compare again these three parables. In the first two parables, notice who gets the focus.

It's not the lost sheep. It's not the lost coin. It's the person looking for the lost sheep and the lost coin.

Did you notice that? Look at the first parable and notice it's all about what the shepherd does. He owns the sheep, he leaves the sheep, he searches for the sheep, and he calls for his friends when the sheep is found.

[14 : 39] Similarly, in the second parable, the focus is on the woman. She likes, she sweeps, she looks, she calls when the coin is found.

And when we get to the third parable, notice again how Jesus begins. Not, now there were two brothers. Instead, there was a man.

who had two sons. We are clearly meant to see him in parallel with the shepherd and the woman. And in the rest of the parable, it is the father, not the sons, who has a recurring role.

In episode one, which we just heard, he's there with the younger son. And later on in episode two, he's there also with the oldest son.

So really, to call this parable, the parable of the prodigal son, is to put the focus on the supporting actor, not the main actor.

[15 : 54] Jesus actually wants to put the focus squarely on the father. father. And in doing so, Jesus is really wanting to teach us something about God himself.

Two related things we need to know in order to understand the climax of this parable. So two things. Firstly, God persistently seeks out the lost.

He's pursuing the wayward. Jesus opens with a story about the shepherd. When he realises one's gone missing, Jesus sets up the problem.

What is the shepherd going to do? Perhaps for many of us, our answer would be, just leave the one be. You still have 99.

it doesn't make economic sense to go hunting for the lost sheep. After all, no responsible shepherd is going to leave 99 shepherds alone in the wilderness just to go after one.

[17 : 07] You might end up losing 100 sheep. But God must have missed that economics lesson. For this shepherd goes.

because this one is just as important as the other 99. It's not that the other 99 don't matter.

If any one of them had gone missing, he would have chased after them too. For each sheep is extremely precious to the shepherd. That's the point.

And actually, as one scholar has insightfully pointed out, it is the shepherd's willingness to go after the one that gives the 99 their real security.

If one is sacrificed in the name of the whole group, each individual in the group is insecure, knowing that he or she is of little value.

[18 : 09] If he or she gets lost, he will be left alone to die. But when the shepherd pays a high price to find the one, he is offering the profoundest security to many.

That's who God is. The woman is the same. It's just one coin after all we might reason. But she looks under the cushions, she drags the coffee table out of place, she puts her hands in the gap between the cupboards and the walls, or to find this coin.

Even when night falls, she hasn't given up. She lights the lamp using precious resources, remember this is the days before electricity, to keep hunting for it.

She is determined, she is relentless, she is persistent. We are thinking, why bother? But God must have missed the commerce class as well.

He doesn't chalk it up under the losses column. He's like this woman, going full out in search of one lost coin.

[19 : 28] Why? Why go to all this trouble? Because that sheep, that coin, is infinitely precious to God, God.

And they cannot find their way back to God on their own. You see, today, if I'm lost, as an adult, I can whip up my smartphone, turn on the data, look up Google Maps, and try to work my way back to where I was before.

I try to find my way back. But, if my two-year-old is lost, he can't do that. He doesn't know how to use the smartphone.

he isn't able to do anything just yet apart from standing there and crying. I have to go find him, not the other way around. And the second picture is a more accurate picture of the kind of lostness we are all in.

We need God to come and seek us, not the other way around. We are the coin, sitting under the cushions, doing nothing, perhaps even comfortable where we are for the moment.

[20 : 41] It's God who has to flip up the sofa covers. It's God who pursues us. And that's the father in the third parable.

Now, the way he seeks out his lost younger son is a little different. He doesn't go chasing after him in the far country. But let's pick up the story again in verse 17.

When he came to his senses, he said, how many of my father's hired servants have food to spare? And here I am starving to death. I will set out and go back to my father and say to him, Father, I sin against heaven and against you.

I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants. the son says, this is stupid.

I have a father with everything, but here am I starving to death. But I know I've made a mess of things. I'll beg for forgiveness. I'll tell him I've done wrong to him.

[21 : 51] And I know there's no chance of me being a son ever again. But perhaps he might still feel a bit generous and hire me. The seeds of repentance appear to be sprouting.

Now we can't be fully certain how fully repentant he is at this stage. There's probably mixed motives. He needs to eat after all. And notice he can't quite relate to his father as father just yet.

He thinks of himself just as one of his hired hands. But there is acknowledgement of wrongdoing. There's a change in direction.

But that's where God comes in. Verse 20. So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him.

He ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The father spots him from a mile away. It appears, you see, as if he's never stopped looking for his wayward son to come back.

[23 : 00] And as soon as he sees him, he runs. He doesn't fold his arms and say, finally, and wait for the son to come and throw himself at his feet.

He runs in a rather undignified manner to all around him. And as he barrels down on his startled child, he throws his hands around him and kisses him.

Sharp-eyed scholars have noticed that there's only one other place in the Bible where more or less the exact same thing happens. Back in the Old Testament, when Jacob meets with Esau, another picture of a wayward person reconciling with his family.

Jacob was so overwhelmed by that occasion that he compares his favourable reception to seeing the face of God. for God is always seeking out the lost.

He's after reconciliation. And Jesus himself says the same later on in Luke 19 verse 10, for I have come to seek and save the lost.

[24 : 18] But there's a second related thing that Jesus wants us to see about God. And it's actually something we need to know to fully understand the parable. It's this.

God rejoices when the lost are found. God rejoices when the lost are found. Jesus doesn't just highlight God pursuing the wayward.

Look at what happens in all three parables when the lost are found. Verse 5, And when he finds it, he joyfully puts the sheep on his shoulders and goes home.

Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, Rejoice with me, I have found my lost sheep. Or verse 9, And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, Rejoice with me, I have found my lost coin.

And then crucially, verses 22 to 24. But the father said to his servants, Quick, bring the best rope and put it on him.

[25 : 23] Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again.

He was lost and is found. So they began to celebrate. What exactly is God celebrating when we take all three parables together? He's celebrating the repentance and restoration of a sinner.

Notice both elements are involved. The younger son doesn't come home with a sense of entitlement or with a bunch of prostitutes and alcohol.

He comes instead with a confession ready, with plenty of humility. There is no restoration without the movement of repentance.

God is not being indulgent. The son has to make a U-turn. But where repentance is present, God immediately welcomes.

[26 : 30] As verse 10 says, there's rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. If there is so much excitement over a coin that's been found, how much more excitement there is, Jesus says, when a sinner repents, when the lost are found.

God's excited, and that excitement overflows to all with him. Now, if we stop here, as most people do, most of us, I think, would be satisfied.

Ah, what a heartwarming story of God's beautiful grace. And what happens if we stop here is that we risk sentimentalizing this story.

We risk missing the biggest point of this story, so don't close your Bibles just yet, but keep looking at Luke chapter 15. And notice something else. In the first parable, we have a story about one lost sheep.

In the second parable, we have a story about one lost coin. But in the third parable, we have a story about not just one son, but two sons.

[27 : 48] Now, there was a man who had two sons. But so far, we've only heard about one son. one who was lost and then is found.

But where's the other son? He's been missing from the entire story so far. It is as if he is lost too.

There was a man who had two sons, but so far only one has been found. But that's about to change, because Jesus now moves to the climax of this parable, and it isn't about the younger son.

You see, whenever we're trying to work out the main point of Jesus' parables, we always need to check who's listening in. That will help you to locate the big point he's making.

So who's listening in? Come back with me to verse 1. Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering round to hear Jesus.

[28 : 57] So here's one group of people listening, the tax collectors and sinners. They're especially despised. You see, this is how the Roman Empire collected taxes in many areas.

They tended it out to the highest bidder. An Israelite individual could buy from the rulers the right to collect tax in a certain area.

He has some leeway to set his own rates, give a certain cut to the authorities and keep the rest for himself. He could then hire more people under him to collect money from the locals.

As you can imagine, such an arrangement leaves a lot of room for corruption. These are traitors of the highest order in the eyes of the Jews. They've abandoned God's people, so they've abandoned God.

These are people in the distant country. Many synagogues didn't even allow them entry. The group referred to here simply as sinners are no better.

[30 : 05] These are people who are not very serious about keeping the law. It wasn't that they forgot to offer the sacrifices once or twice or something like that. They just didn't care that much.

And so that's the first group of listeners. But throughout Luke's gospel, Jesus has been saying to this group, come to your senses, come back.

And many of them have in humility. They are the repentant younger sons. Christians. But there's another group.

Verse 2. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, this man welcomes sinners and eats with them. The Pharisees and teachers of the law are present too.

We know them. They are the respectable people of their day. They don't hang around with immoral people. They come to church every Sunday. They look down on others. Now again, for those of us who have been in church for a long time, we're used already to hearing the Pharisees as bad guys.

[31 : 14] And we like to think we're not like them. But the truth is, many of us here are more this group than the other group.

That's what we are. Respectable. Avoiding immoral people. Faithful church goers. And when we look down on the Pharisees, we are at that very moment being more like the Pharisees than we realise.

And they're murmuring amongst themselves. They know very well Jesus has been eating with sinners. And perhaps we don't appreciate it fully today, but back then, to eat with such people is a sign of deep acceptance.

And that's a scandal to the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. And that's why Jesus is not finished yet. Because this is actually his primary audience.

In verse 23, the older son returns after a long, hard day in the fields. And to his surprise, he hears the sound of the barbecue pit sizzling.

[32 : 26] He hears the jazz in the background. He can even smell the champagne. So he calls a servant to find out what's happening, and the servant tells him verse 27.

Your brother has come, he replied, and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound. And as a result, he flies into a rage.

He's like an upset little child on his first day of school, absolutely refusing to go into the classroom. And the oldest son lets the father have it.

Notice the kind of words he uses. All these years I've been slaving for you, yet you never gave me a young goat, but this son of yours.

And think for a moment how he's relating to his father. Not once does he call him dad. He just says, look, it's equivalent to us shouting, oi.

[33 : 34] Yet, yes, he's been a good son all his life. He's worked hard, he's never misbehaved, he's not mixed around with the wrong crowd, he feels like he's earned his deal.

But now we begin to realise he too never had a relationship with his father. In fact, he seems only interested in what he can get from his father, the goat and the fattened calf.

Just like the younger son. The only difference is that he's been keeping the rules. If his younger brother was the lawbreaker, he's the lawkeeper.

father's father's father's father. But they're both only after the father's things, not the father. And the moment it looks like the rules don't matter, all his anger comes boiling over.

And he's especially upset that his younger brother's return is welcome so easily. Where's the justice in that he rages? You see, the older son's attitude is 180 degrees different from his dad.

[34 : 44] When a sinner repents, his father rejoices. He chose a party. When a sinner repents, the older brother chose a tantrum.

His effort has no reward, he reasons. Why did I bother keeping all these rules if I get nothing out of it? And his heart is exposed. That's what matters to him, not his relationship to his father.

That too clearly has been broken long ago. You see, he is very much just as lost as his younger brother, just in a different form.

There is not one lost son, there are two. But how does the father respond? Notice that just like with the younger son, it is actually the father who makes the first move.

In verse 28, he comes out. He's seeking out his other lost son, his pursuing the wayward. And verse 31, he says to him gently, my son, you are always with me and everything I have is yours.

[35 : 57] He doesn't downplay the son's obedience, but he implicitly asks, is not the reward of being with his father already there? And then he challenges him implicitly, verse 32, are you not rejoicing at the return, repentance, and restoration of your younger sibling?

The tension is now at its highest in the story. How is the oldest son going to respond? But we never get an answer.

Because you see, Jesus is really directing his parable at the Pharisees listening in. What do you think, he's asking? What about you?

What about us? You see, Jesus says everyone is lost. The question is, how have we gone wayward?

A few of us might be younger brothers, breaking all the rules, looking for pleasure. But many of us today might be more like older brothers, keeping all the rules, looking for honour.

[37 : 10] But neither son is looking for the father himself. And when the father doesn't give us what we want, we get very angry. I did all these things for you, God.

So why am I still sick? Why is my child still doing badly at school? Why didn't I get that job? Why isn't my ministry fruitful? We're doing the right things, but for the wrong reasons.

And there is one question that Jesus directs at older brothers in particular. What is it that makes you really happy? Is it his stuff?

By all means, enjoy God's good gifts. What is his he has shared with us abundantly in creation? Good food, beautiful nature. All those are good things.

things. But let's reflect. Is it the conversion of a sinner that makes you really, really happy? Do you rejoice abundantly when a lost person has been found?

[38 : 18] When you hear that someone's become a Christian through Christianity explored, does your joy overflow? Do you say, come, let's celebrate? Do you welcome the neo-Christian into the family?

You see, this is what God is doing in this world. He is pursuing the wayward. He is seeking out the lost. That is the mission of Jesus.

And a good barometer of whether we're on board with that mission or not is whether we rejoice like the Father. Or do we get mad when people who look like they're very immoral, very bad sinners, join our church?

never mind that they have professed faith. Do we grumble when we think, I like KEC the way it has been for the last decade very much, thank you.

I don't want all these new converts here, especially if we have to change things to accommodate them. And that's actually the big, sharp point Jesus is making to the Pharisees.

[39 : 21] Why are you so unhappy that I'm eating with tax collectors and sinners? don't you know to welcome repentant returnees is at the very heart of God?

And if we are not at all happy, it should actually cause us to reflect. Do we actually know the Father? Do we think of him as a slave master or as this shepherd-like father?

If I were to propose a name change to how this parable is commonly titled, the one I like is the parable of the compassionate father. That's who God is.

Every single one of us is lost, but he loved us so much that he came to seek us through Jesus. Because his heart is filled with compassion towards you, he put his money where his mouth is.

For Jesus came to this distant country for our sake. He was like an older brother who kept all the rules but sacrificed himself for younger brothers because unlike the older brother in this parable, he never lost sight of the father's love.

[40 : 41] And if we truly knew the heart of the father, our own hearts melt. We too become compassionate towards others, we want them to know Jesus no matter who they are.

And we would want KEC to make this our primary mission. And we rejoice when people repent and are restored.

That is at the very heart of everyone who is a true son and daughter of God. So the younger son is lost but found. But now the older son has to make a decision.

What about us? That's the question I leave with you this morning. God is pursuing the wayward. Do you want to be an older brother?

Or are you ready to get on board with his program? tres to head and■