

“The Gospel in a word is Love.” (7)

The 15th chapter of Luke is probably one of the best-loved chapters in the Bible. Some people describe it as ‘The Gospel within the Gospel.’ And certainly in many ways we do have the Gospel in miniature here in Luke 15. And as someone once said, ‘It contained the very distilled essence of the good news which Jesus had come to tell.’ Now in here we find three parables of Jesus but we’re not going to look at them all today. Over the next couple of weeks we are going to look at them individually.

But before we get started let me share with you a story I heard about a couple who just got married and when they were on their honeymoon, the husband took his new wife by the hand and said, "Now that we're married, dear, I hope you won't mind if I mention a few little defects that I've noticed about you." And his wife sweetly replied, "Not at all, it was those little defects that kept me from getting a better husband."

And I guess the point is that we can all see little defects in people at times, but we should never let those defects stop us from approaching them with the Gospel of Christ. In our first parable in Luke 15, we find Jesus sharing His truths with our dear friends, the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law. Luke 15:1+2 “Now the tax collectors and "sinners" were all gathering around to hear him. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them."

Have you ever had people doing that with you? Maybe you’re talking with someone who is known as a drunkard and other passers by take note of it. Maybe you’re seen talking with a drug dealer in the street and the people around take notice of you both. And when you look over at them, you can see them whispering things about you because of the person you’re speaking too.

And they are probably saying things like, “If he only knew who he was talking to, if he only knew what kind of person that was.” And when we as Christians talk to anyone who doesn’t fit in with societies idea of acceptable, society takes it as an offence.

In Luke 7 when Jesus is invited into a Pharisees house, a woman comes in off the street and it’s clear that she is not welcome. And so Jesus says to Simon in Luke 7:33, “Simon, do you see this woman?” I mean how could he not see the woman? She’s standing there in front on him. The problem was Simon saw a tramp, Simon saw a sinner, an unclean woman. Someone who wasn’t good enough to be saved.

But the point is that just like Simon many people are offended when we say that the Gospel is for those kinds of people too. Well that’s the kind of thing that’s going on here in Luke 15. It was an offence to the Jewish leaders that Jesus should be seen in association with the tax collectors and sinners.

You see by their own regulations, and we looked at some of them the last time we were together, a Pharisee was forbidden to be the guest of any such man. They were even forbidden to have these people as their guests. They weren’t allowed to have any dealings with tax collectors and sinners as far as it was possible. They couldn’t even buy anything from them or even sell anything to them. They were to try and avoid any contact with them all together.

So now that we understand the Pharisees’ thinking we can see why they were shocked by Jesus’ actions. But they weren’t just shocked; they were shocked to the core because this man, who claimed to be their Messiah, wanted so much to spend time in the company with those outsiders. In their minds if you had anything to do to with sinners you were guaranteed to be corrupted.

Their attitude wasn’t so much, “There is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents,” but rather it was “There is joy in heaven when one sinner is obliterated before God.” They looked sadistically forward, not to the saving of the sinner but to the destruction of the sinner. And it is because these religious leaders considered themselves already in the fold, that Jesus tells them they should be glad that He was seeking those who were outside the fold.

Luke 15:3-6 “Then Jesus told them this parable: "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? And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.'”

Now this is certainly one of the simplest of parables that Jesus ever taught.

And in Judea at this time it was all so easy for a sheep to go astray. You see the pastureland was on the hill country, which would run like a backbone down the middle of the land. Now this ridge like plateau was very narrow, it was only a few miles across and at its best this pastureland was bare and so the sheep were very liable to wander. And in their search for more grass they would wander off into little gullies and ravines and very often they would end up on some ledge where they couldn't get back up or down. And all too often many would just stay there until they died.

Now here in this parable we have one of Jesus' most favourite pictures of God. A picture of a loving, caring shepherd who brought home the wanderer. And so what I want to do today is share with you **5 small points** from this parable about the love of God.

1. The love of God is an individual love. Jesus says in **Luke 15:4** "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?"

You see the **99 sheep** were not enough for Jesus, He wanted the whole lot. And when one went wandering, He wasn't going to rest until He brought it back home again.

It's a bit like the two young women who met a frog on the street one day. And the frog said, "Kiss me and I'll turn into an independent oil man." So one of the women picked him up and put him in her purse. The other woman said, "Well aren't you going to kiss him?" Her friend said, "No way. A talking frog is really worth something."

And that's what Jesus is telling us here that He has a love to offer that's not just for everyone, but a love especially for you. You see the Palestine shepherds were experts at tracking down their sheep and they could follow the tracks of their sheep for miles. And they would go to any lengths to bring that sheep back.

Jesus says the same thing in **Matthew 18:12** "If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off?" And we would do the same with our family members, **wouldn't we?**

No matter how big your family is, if one of them goes astray, you would go to all lengths to find them and bring them back to safety. Every time you listen to the news on TV and someone has lost a family member, they send out pleas for help to find them again, some even offer a reward to anyone who can help find them. But my point is, even though some people have got **10 children**, if one goes missing, that's one that they cannot do without.

And that's because there is not one who doesn't matter. And our God is like that, He's not happy until the last one is gathered in. Paul says **1 Timothy 1:15** "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst." Paul is saying when he recognised that he was a sinner; he also understood that God's love was an individual love. And like we've always said if you're not a Christian, then God wants to offer that same individual love to you today.

2. The love of God is a patient love. Now we all know how stupid sheep are, they are such foolish creatures. And so to a degree the sheep had no one **but itself to blame for the dangers it had got itself into.** And we do that with people all the time, especially with those who are foolish sometimes.

What do we say when people get into some kind of trouble? I'll tell you what we say, we say, "Well, it's their own fault, they brought it on themselves, don't waste any sympathy on them." Well let me tell you something loved ones, thank God, God isn't like that. The sheep might be foolish but thank God the Good Shepherd would still risk His life to save it.

A family went to church one day and it happened to be **Palm Sunday.** But because of a sore throat, five-year-old Johnny stayed home from church with a baby sitter. And when the family returned home, they were carrying several palm branches. And so little Johnny asked, "What they were for." And his older brother explained to him that "People held them over Jesus' head, as he walked by." Little Johnny became upset and said, "Wouldn't you know it, the one Sunday I don't go, He showed up!"

And thank God He did show up. Thank God for **John 10:11** where Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

Thank God for 2 Peter 3:9 where Peter says, “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.” Thank God that even though mankind can be foolish, God in His love, loves even the foolish man who has got no one to blame for his sin and sorrow but himself. Thank God that He is a loving, patient God.

3. **The love of God is a seeking love.** You see the flocks of sheep in Palestine were very often communal flocks. In other words they didn't belong to an individual; they usually belonged to the whole village. And so because of that there were usually two or three shepherds with them, that's one of the reasons the shepherd could leave the other 99. Because if they couldn't leave the sheep with other shepherds, when they returned they would find that other sheep would have went astray.

You see when Jesus came to earth; He came on a search and rescue mission, He came to search for the lost and rescue them from their sins. But the point is that He came for us. The shepherd wasn't willing to wait for the sheep to come back; He went out to search for it. And loved ones that's what the Jews even today, cannot understand about the Christian idea of God.

Now the Jew would gladly agree with us, if we said that if the sinner comes crawling wretchedly home to God, then God would forgive them. But we know our God is far more wonderful than that. For in Christ Jesus, God came to seek and to search for those who wander. He's not content to wait until men come home, **Oh, no!** He goes and searches for them, no matter what it costs Him. The shepherds of Palestine would always make the most strenuous and the most sacrificial efforts to find a lost sheep.

1 John 4:9+10 “This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” Jesus came to find us before we thought about finding Him.

Luke 19:10 “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”

John 10:7-10 “I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”

On board many military ships nowadays they have heat-seeking missiles. And even though they are hundreds of miles away from their targets, they can programme them to within 2 feet of their target. And when they reach their intended target, they completely destroy everything within its range. But Jesus says He didn't come to seek and destroy, He came to seek and to give life, but not just life but life to the full. The love of God is a seeking love.

And that brings me to my next point. 4. **The love of God is a rejoicing love.** This parable is all about joy. You see when the shepherd went to find the lost sheep, they had a rule. And the rule was that if the sheep couldn't be brought back alive, then where possible, the sheep's fleece or bones must be brought back to prove that the sheep was indeed dead.

But we can imagine how the other shepherds would return with their flocks to the village at evening time and how they would tell how one shepherd was still out on the mountains seeking the wanderer. And imagine the eyes of those villagers, watching over the mountains waiting and looking for the shepherd who hadn't come home yet. And then off in the distance, they would see a little figure of someone getting closer to the village. And as that figure gets closer, they realise that this is the shepherd and the joy in their faces would be great to see. But as he gets closer they notice that he's carrying this wanderer of a sheep across his shoulders and it's still alive. And the whole village would come out and joyfully surround him and welcome him home.

Now if that were the church, **I wonder how we would react?** I wonder if we would say things like, “Where have you been for the past few months? What sinful acts have you been involved in? Do you need to confess anything before the whole church today?”

Galatians 6:1 “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently.”

You see with Jesus there are no accusations, there is no receiving back with grudges, there's no superior contempt, it's all about joy. And instead of the church accepting a person who is repentant with a moral lecture and making it clear that they must see themselves as a disgraceful person. And instead of making it clear that we are never going to trust them again, maybe we can be like God, who forgets our past sins and doesn't hold our sins against us.

Micah 7:19 "You will once again have mercy on us; you will conquer our evil deeds; you will hurl our sins into the depths of the sea." God has thrown our sins into the depths of the sea loved ones and there are warning signs all around the shore. **And do you know what those signs say?** No fishing.

We shouldn't be in the business of dragging up the past sins in our own lives, never mind the sins of other people's lives if God has thrown them away. Psalm 103:8-12 "The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. He will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us."

And so when one of the flock goes astray and returns home, instead of reminding them of their sin, maybe we can put their sin behind God's back like He does with ours when we get lost and come back to Him. Then we too can be happy like Jesus tells us in Matthew 18:13+14 "And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost."

Do you realise that you can give heaven an excuse to party? Now I know that many people after they have been in prison for a few years often get together with their families to celebrate their new found freedom. But let me tell you that, that's nothing, like the celebration that breaks out in heaven when someone returns to God after going off back to the world. Even **Robbie Williams** got that right in his song "Angels", when he said, "that salvation makes their wings unfold."

Jesus tells us in Luke 15:7 "I 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." And if you're involved in a sin, which is dragging you away from God, then you can be sure that if you repent and turn back to God there will be rejoicing in heaven. The day you became a Christian was a day of rejoicing and if you're not a Christian today and one day you decide to become a faithful follower of the Lord then heaven will rejoice with you too.

The love of God is a rejoicing love. Then finally, **point number 5. The love of God is a protecting love.** I heard a story about a sergeant who was in the army and he was off fighting a war in some far off land. He and some of his friends were called off for a special mission but when the enemy found them, the sergeant faced them head on. And while he was facing them he said to himself, "Lord, it's your responsibility now." And as he reached for his gun, a shot from one of his enemies struck him in the chest and blasted him down to the ground. Thinking that he was dead, his friend grabbed his gun and started to blast away at the enemy. He received three bullet wounds but when he had finished, all his enemies were dead. The sergeant wrote a letter to his sister and it said this, "I was amazed when I rolled over and tried to get up. The force of that bullet only stunned me. I couldn't understand why, so I pulled out my Bible from my pocket and in utter quietness looked at the ugly hole in the cover." "It had ripped through Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and kept going. Where do you think it stopped?" In the middle of Psalm 91, he pointed his finger at verse 7, which says, "A thousand may fall at your side, ten thousand at your right hand, but it will not come near you." He went on to say that he didn't know such a verse existed in the Bible and in utter humility said, "Thank you, precious God."

You see it's not just a love that seeks; it's also a love that saves. Now there can be a love which ruins, there can be a love that softens but the love of God is the protecting love which saves a person for the service of their fellow men.

Psalm 34:18-20 "The Lord is close to the broken-hearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. A righteous man may have many troubles, but the Lord delivers him from them all; he protects all his bones, not one of them will be broken."

Psalm 55:16+17 "But I call to God, and the Lord saves me. Evening, morning and noon I cry out in distress, and he hears my voice." That's why Paul could say in 2 Corinthians 12:10 "For when I am weak, then I am strong."

In other words its God's protecting love that makes the wanderer wise. Its God's protecting love that makes the weak strong. Its God's protecting love that makes the sinner pure. Its God's protecting love that makes the captive of sin a freeman of holiness. Its God's protecting love that makes the overpowered by temptation the conqueror of sin. God's love is a protecting love and God's love will not only protect us in this life but also in the life to come. Because as long as we are faithful to Him, then you can be sure that nothing can separate us from His love.

Romans 8:34-39 "Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died--more than that, who was raised to life--is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." So Paul says there is nothing in heaven or in hell or on this earth that can stop God from loving you.

When I was younger I used to love watching David Carradine in the TV series called Kung Fu. And his Master would always be teaching him something new every week, but also every week, David had to try and snatch a pebble from his Master's hand but he never could because His Master's hands were just too quick.

And our God is like that; His hands are just too quick. Jesus says in John 10:27-30 "My sheep listen to my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish; no one will snatch them from my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one can snatch them from my Father's hand. The Father and I are one."

So Jesus says, no-one will snatch us from God's mighty hands and that's because He's a protecting God. Now loved ones, that's the Gospel, that's the Gospel according to Christ. If you ever want to share the good news with anyone who's interested in God, then take them to Luke 15. Share with them the Gospel within the Gospel and let them know that Jesus' Gospel is a Gospel of love.

And who knows, instead of people thinking that Christianity is all about the things they have to give up to receive God's love. Maybe then they will begin to think about the love that they are going to receive from God, which will help them give up the things they need to give up. After all, as the song says, "Love, love, love, love, the Gospel in a word is love."