

Luke 15

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[0 : 00] And please keep your Bible open in Luke chapter 15, the chapter that we read a few moments ago.

So, that's on page 1048. And we're focusing tonight on the first two parables there, the parable of the lost sheep and the parable of the lost coin.

The chapter that we're looking at, Luke 15, has been the focus of a huge amount of attention in Christian circles, in Christian conversation, in sermons, in books, and online discussions in the last few years. I haven't done any kind of polls of this, because that would be really hard to do. But I think if you were to do that, that you would find that this chapter has attracted a really huge amount of focus. And I think that a large part of that, well, the focus is on, particularly on the third story, the third parable in this chapter, the parable of the two sons. And a large part of that has been a book, Tim Keller's book, *The Prodigal God*. It's a book that focuses on these two sons and their story, and that explores what is happening there. It unpacks the context, and it presents this as a really deeply shocking and scandalous story and context, not just with the first son, but also with the second, with how they treated their father, with what they wanted from him. So, this book has been translated into numerous languages. The last time I checked, it was number 923 on Amazon's best-selling book list.

Now, you hear that, and you think, okay, number 923 in the charts. That doesn't sound that impressive, does it? But Amazon sells around five million different books. So, if you make it into the top thousand, then your book is selling incredibly well, and it's being read by a lot of people.

The message that this book has, *The Prodigal God*, is refreshing for some people. It's controversial for others. The message of that book, of how he reads this parable, is that you can be equally lost in rebellion, let's say, in being irreligious, in turning your back on God and living a wild life, or you can be lost in slavishly following religion and rules and having an attempt to please God that doesn't stem from God's grace. Instead, you're trying to do enough good things that you'll earn something from God. So, when he interprets this book, and when people read it and they start discussing it, the thing they're discussing is, are both of these sons lost? Traditionally, there's been a lot of talk of the prodigal son, and he was the one who was lost. But Tim Keller says in his book that both of the sons were lost, because neither son loved their father for who he was. Both wanted his money, both wanted his estate, but they had very different ways of trying to get it. So, the first son just wants the money and just wants to take it and run, and the second just wants the money and the estate, but he tries to earn it the kind of slow and steady way by being a really good son. But they're both lost.

[3 : 37] That's the point of the book that's generated so much discussion of Luke 15. And that's a controversial message, the idea that you can be lost in religion as much as in rejecting religion. So, it poses this question, can you really be lost through your religiosity just as much as through your rebellion?

And if that's true, then people start asking themselves questions and talking a lot about, well, which of these two sons am I then? Am I naturally the first son in the story? Am I someone who wants to forge his own path without God and without the Bible guiding my choices? And do I not want God in my life? Or am I the slavishly religious type? Is my natural tendency to try and be a really upstanding moral person, a religious person, and make sure that I'm doing enough things and ticking enough boxes that God will have to say, well, this person's done a good job, therefore, God will accept me. So, there's been a huge amount of discussion globally on the third parable here, enough to take one of five million books on Amazon and make it number 923 in the bestsellers list, enough to see it translated into so many languages. But what I'd like us to focus on tonight is the question of what about the first two parables told by Jesus en route to this third one about these two sons. The story of the lost sheep seems a lot less exciting than the story of the two sons, especially

when you hear the story of the two sons explored in context or explained in context, because what both of the sons do is so shocking. So, when the first son comes and says to his father, I want my share of the inheritance and I want it now, he's publicly shaming his father. In effect, he's saying to him, I wish you were dead because you wouldn't get your inheritance until your father died. It's as profoundly, deeply disrespectful as you could imagine in that culture. And then when the second son gets furious with his father, when he says, I'm not coming in, how could you do this? That's also really scandalous in context that a son would say this to his father. When the father comes running to embrace his son as a mature patriarch of the family in a culture where mature men of the family did not run, especially not in public, the whole thing is a really exciting, tense story.

But then you have the story of the lost sheep at the beginning of the chapter, and it doesn't grab us as much at the beginning. You know, we don't live in, generally, but most of us here, I suppose, in agricultural contexts. It's simply outside our experience. There's a shepherd, he has a hundred sheep, he loses one, okay, big deal. It doesn't really shake me like the story of the two sons can. [6:38] Well, we know vaguely about sheep is, well, they're not very bright and they get lost, but what can I, an intelligent human being, someone who's not a sheep, learn from a story like that? And then you have the story of a poor woman who loses a coin, and it's not instantly exciting to us. Ten coins or ten drachma, it tells us in the footnote there, well, what's that? How much is that in pounds nowadays?

For us, we think, well, that's just small change, and small change for so many of us is just a hassle rather than an advantage. Now, if you're looking in your pocket for change for the bus, and all you pull out is one P, you probably don't think, yes, a penny, what a world of possibilities, how much I can do with this? You probably don't see any possibilities of all you have is a penny, right? So, for a lot of us, we just don't think about pocket change like that. So, the story of a woman and she loses a coin, what's so exciting about that? What's so dramatic? But what I would like us to see is that these three stories, the sheep, the coin, and the sons belong together, and Jesus tells them consecutively like this in a row for a reason, and when you look at them together, their meaning becomes far more clear.

The story of the lost sons is scandalous, less so to us in terms of immediate impact, because we live in a culture where it's pretty normal that children choose their own path in life. You're not defined by your father's identity or his profession. You make your own way, and you become what you want to become. But as I was saying in context, what this first son says to his father, I don't want to be defined by you. I don't want to be known as your son. I don't want you in my life at all. I wish that you weren't around. I wish you were dead and not in my life. I'd rather live my life without you. I don't want to belong to you, but what I do want from you is your money, and I want that now, and you'll have to be ashamed publicly to do that. You'll have to sell off lots of your fields in a way that will make everyone know that your son has disrespected you. I don't care if me getting what I want means public humiliation for you. The story is shocking. The details are surprising. As I said, the father's open show of emotion when he comes running, when he kisses his son, when the older son shames his father as well by not coming into the party. It's a powerful story, and it deals with how we are lost without Jesus. But the question I'm asking tonight is, what do we learn about that lostness when we read the stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin, seemingly far less dramatic stories, and the story of the two lost sons together? So, when you look at this as a whole chapter, John Calvin, a Protestant reformer, said that when we read these stories together, we learn two things about the nature of our lostness without Christ, or the nature of our rebellion against God. On the one hand, he says, especially in the story of the sons, we learn about how our rebellion against God and how our lostness is conscious and it's deliberate.

[10:09] We go out of our way to be lost. But he says, on the other hand, in the stories of the coin and the sheep, we see that our rebellion against God can also be unconscious, something that's not really intentional or deliberate, can be something that we fall into almost as if by accident, like a sheep that goes astray because it just doesn't know any better, or a coin, something valuable and worth keeping that just somehow gets lost and needs to be found. In context, the beginning of the chapter tells us that Jesus was hanging out with tax collectors and sinners, so the real losers of his society, the people that the good religious folk look down on. And the Pharisees see this, and they're muttering and really making fun of him, saying, look at this guy. He thinks he's some kind of a rabbi, some kind of a great religious teacher, but he's happy to spend his time with sinners, and

he even eats with them. What's wrong with this guy? Why does he do this? Jesus devotes his time to the seemingly lost causes of his day, but why? Why is he happy to spend his time with the tax collectors, with the sinners? And why is he happy to spend his life with people like that? Well, in answering that question, that is why he tells these three stories back to back. Three stories about things that were lost, and then that were found, and three stories in which the one who finds them then is overcome with joy, and having found whatever was lost. So, tonight we're looking at the first two stories. So, we look firstly at the lost sheep. 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 neighbors together and says, rejoice with me, I have found my lost sheep. Now, there are probably not that many shepherds in

Bonacord Free Church, although maybe some of you are shepherds and have no idea about it, but probably this is a picture that is really far removed from our lives, from our cultural experiences. But people in Jesus, they would have understood where this was going right away. They would have got the details of his picture. Oh, a hundred sheep. Okay, I get that. So, it's someone who's not amazingly wealthy, but also not someone who's poor. So, an average flock was between twenty and two hundred sheep. So, this is someone who's just bang in the middle. And sheep, well, okay, I get that. That's in our culture. It's useful for wool, useful for meat, useful for milk. And one of his hundred sheep is missing. Okay, one hundredth of what he has for his income, for his livelihood. Imagine someone in Aberdeen who has his own business.

Okay, not a huge international business with offices in Paris and London and New York and Aberdeen, but a successful business in its own right locally. Let's say a painting and decorating business.

So, there's the owner and he has two young lads who work for him part-time. So, the boss isn't a millionaire, but he's also not poor. He keeps a roof over his head, you know, feeds his children, provides jobs for these two young guys. And generally, things are going well, but his business isn't the kind of business that could handle a really big loss, major deficit. So, when things are going well, the business is still vulnerable. Now, imagine that that guy who has this business is speaking to his accountant one day. And the accountant says to him, I've been going through the accounts and the books and something doesn't quite add up. I'm not really sure why, but for every hundred pounds you've taken in, one pound just isn't there. It's missing. And I don't know where that one percent has gone, but it's definitely not there. And that has really big consequences for your business.

Last year, you broke even, but it was really tight. And with the missing one percent this year, I can tell you that you're now running a significant loss. Your business isn't viable. You haven't made enough to pay these lads, these young guys, and you either have to find the money or you have to let them go. And as it stands, you can't pay your mortgage anymore. So, what are they going to do? Well, the owner of the business and the accountant will get to work right away because they need to find the missing one percent. So, they do all kinds of research and they go through all of the books. They look at all their transactions. Imagine that they end up learning the one percent was missing through a bank error and they get it all back. How is that boss going to react? They say, oh, all right then. Okay, whatever. That's fine. Sorted. There's just no chance he would react like that. He would be delighted. He would be elated. He would be relieved. But in no way would he be just indifferent to what has happened. He can pay his own mortgage again. The roof stays over his head.

[15 : 39] His children stay fed. He doesn't have to lay off his workers. His business has now broken even again. That's like the story of the shepherd who lost one of his 100 sheep. But in my story there, it's the boss who's vulnerable. He is the one who stands to lose everything. In Jesus' story, it's not really the shepherd. It's the sheep that is vulnerable. There are consequences for the shepherd if one of his sheep disappears, but he himself isn't in any immediate danger. For the sheep, though, there's a real and immediate danger. The sheep that gets lost, there are wolves, there are birds of prey, there are rivers, there are dangerous cliffs. The relationship of shepherd to lost sheep is about more than just something important is lost. It's about something important has been lost, and out of love for that thing, for that sheep, the shepherd is doing everything he can to find it, because the lost sheep is in danger. And when he finds the sheep, he isn't just happy because the lost 1% of his herd has been recovered. He's happy because this important, precious,

living creature is now safe. Let's have a party because my sheep isn't going to walk over a cliff. It's not going to walk into a river. It won't be attacked by wolves. Let us celebrate. If we want to know how God sees our lostness without Christ, without his grace, this is a story that we need to know.

God sees us as a shepherd sees his lost sheep, as his creation, as both vulnerable and valuable, as needing saved and being worthy of pursuit, worthy of looking for, like a sheep without a shepherd.

I tell you, there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over the 99 who do not. Then we go on secondly to the lost coin, where suppose a woman has 10 silver coins, or 10 drachmas, and loses one. Does she not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?

And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, rejoice with me, I have found my lost coin. So, this is another story about someone who loses something, who finds it again, and is overcome with joy. But in this story, it's about a woman, probably a lot poorer than the shepherd. And her wealth, her savings are these 10 coins, these 10 drachmas. And a drachma was the average wage for a manual laborer for a day. So, for her savings, she has, let's say, 500 pounds. And that's all she has. So, in their culture, women would often wear their savings as jewelry. It's like you still have in India, where you invest your money in gold jewelry, and where you're literally wearing your savings as you walk around. It looks good, and if you need money, you can sell it. You can sell some of your bangles. So, from this chapter, we don't know for sure if that's what the woman was doing with her drachma, but that was really normal in this world, in this culture. So, it's likely that's what she was doing. Her savings were not just an adornment, that kind of jewelry to wear. They were really important to her, a necessity, because women had such a vulnerable place in society. Jesus doesn't say anything about her husband or her children, but for an unmarried woman in this context, or a married woman who's then widowed, and if she doesn't have children, who could look after her, and if she could no longer provide for herself because of, let's say, ill health, injury, she had no way of providing for herself, and that would make her life extremely difficult. How would you buy your bread? How would you keep a roof over your head? But the woman in this story has a backup plan should that happen. She has managed to save up ten drachmas. She has 500 pounds. So, come what may, if she's widowed or if she's unmarried, and she can't work to feed herself anymore, she still has something to buy food with. But one day she realizes one of her drachmas is gone, one of these coins is gone, so where is it? Now, I was saying before, stories about pennies are not really exciting for us, but if you know the context of the woman, and her place in society, and her lost coin, and what that meant to her, it becomes a far more tense story. Without this coin, her future is really risky. Her prospects are far bleaker. Imagine, you know, that you're, you work here in Aberdeen, you do your job, and you're contributing to your pension every month, so that in the future, when you can't work anymore, that you still have some kind of an income. And then one day you discover that 10% of your pension funds has disappeared overnight. So, one day you're thinking, well, when

[21 : 15] I retire, I'll still have, or when I can't work anymore, well, I'll still have X amount to live on, and it won't be enough to be, you know, heading off to Aruba every weekend, or anything like that, but it's enough to live on. It won't be much, but I can make do, and that's my safety net. I'll be okay.

And then the next day you discover that your safety net is 10% smaller, and you start to think, whoa, this is going to be a lot more difficult than I thought it would be. What would you do? Well, like this woman, you would start investigating. You start making a lot of phone calls. You would start finding out, are other people affected? Where has this 10% gone? What's happened?

In 2010, there was a hairdresser in England, Sally Donaldson, who got a new job, this is a true story, and who opened up a new bank account. She'd started this new job, and she wanted to save the majority of her money, her salary, for the future. She was then just living on the same salary as her husband, so her money was to go directly to a savings account. So she set up a direct debit for a big chunk of her salary each month to go straight into this other savings account. And she thought to herself, okay, well, I've set this up at the beginning, that's arranged, I've done everything on the website, the money is just going to go straight into the savings account. But she never thought to check how much was in that account, or to check that the money was going into it, until two years later, when she thought, I'll have a look and see what's there in the account, and see how much I've saved. So she logs in and looks at the account, and it's empty. There's nothing there after two years. And then she realized her mistake. So when she was setting all this up at the beginning, she

filled in one number, one digit in the receiving bank account number wrongly.

One digit was wrong, and for two years her monthly wage, her nest egg for the future, is going into some random person's bank account. Two years of salary paid to an unknown person, over £20,000 for her future lost. So she phoned her bank, and she phoned the police right away, but there was nothing they could do. It was her mistake, and the laws on confidentiality mean that her bank cannot tell her the name of the person who has received her money. And neither the bank nor the police could demand that the person who received the money give it back, and in any event, this person who received the money apparently has spent it all, so there's no money even to give back to her. It's a really awful situation, really heartbreaking for this woman.

But imagine that the law was different. Imagine that this had happened, but the police and the bank could demand the money back. So this woman who realizes that her two years of saving for her future, which was lost, has been found again, and that this wasn't all a waste. I have my nest egg again.

[24 : 21] Would she just be kind of indifferent and thinking, okay, well, I'm glad that's sorted out. She would be delighted. She'd be relieved. She would want to throw a party. She would want to celebrate.

Jesus tells us, so I say to you, there is joy among the angels of God over one sinner who repents. There's a clear theme that's shared by all of these stories, this idea of lost and found, that something has disappeared, that it's not where it should be, and the owner wants to look for it, to find it, whatever that takes, whether it's a shepherd leaving the 99 sheep behind and going to whatever dangerous cliff or ravine he has to go to to find the lost sheep, whether it's the woman clearing her whole house out looking at every nook and cranny until she finds the lost coin, or whether it's this father who's willing to endure shame and disgrace to go running to his son and not to demand repayments or anything like that, simply to to kiss him, put the best robe on his back, put the ring on his finger and kill the fattened calf. And all of these stories, it's lost to found to joy with the one who was looking, the one who's found what should have been there in the first place. Joy in the joy of God himself, even the angels of God rejoicing. So, they have this clear theme, something that's shared, but the three parables are still very different from each other. So, in the first parable, our lostness is like a lost sheep.

It's a stupid kind of lostness, the lostness of someone who just doesn't know any better, who wanders off not in any clear-headed way, without any real sense of purpose. I am going to reject God.

It just happens through not knowing any better, like a sheep that just wanders off into danger. Our lostness can be like that. I kind of don't know any better garbled thinking kind of lostness.

But our lostness can also be like this lost sheep, in that we as lost people are vulnerable without Christ's protection and care, and that we, like a lost sheep, are valuable to the shepherd.

[26 : 57] This is one percent of what he has, what he values, what he wants, what belongs to him. And then with the second parable, our lostness is a different kind of lostness, like a lost coin, passive. It just gets lost. We don't really know how, almost as if by accident.

And what's lost is lost passively, what's lost is beautiful, what's lost is important, inherently valuable, something with dignity, something that is important, something that is worth looking for, something where it's completely reasonable for this woman to turn her whole house upside down to find the lost coin.

In these first two parables, the emphasis lies solely on God searching for us. So, they present us as passive, hopeless in our lostness, and God is the one who comes to us. So, God in Christ is the good shepherd, is the one who comes looking for the sheep. God in Christ is the woman who turns the whole house upside down, tidying everything, dusting everything out, opening all the boxes, looking through all the pockets until the coin is found. In the third parable, with these two sons, it presents a very different picture of our lostness, where our lostness can be completely intentional, completely deliberate, scandalously self-aware, and intentionally without love for God, turning our backs on Him because we want to.

Like a son who, with no love for his father, tells him, I wish you were dead. I wish you were not in the picture of my life. And here, we also see that the younger son looking in some way for his father, although in the wrong way, he wants to come and earn his father's forgiveness. Make me like one of your servants when the father says, no, you are my son. So, then I think the question becomes, well, if I'm a Christian, if I was lost and now I've been found, or if you're not a Christian, you ask

yourself, well, according to this, I'm still lost, but what does that actually mean? What kind of lost person am I? Or if you're a Christian, what kind of lost person was I? Am I like a sheep that wandered astray? Or am I like the coin that was just accidentally lost? Or am I like one of these two sons that just wants to be married to God for his money, or wants to take the money and run? What does it mean for me either to be lost currently or to have been lost? Am I the clueless sheep? Or am I the cunning son? Am I the passive coin? Or am I the active rebel?

[30 : 15] And the answer is, and must be, to all of that, yes. Yes to all of that. Because the story of how Christ saves us from our rebellion is really complex. The darkness of the human heart without God's grace, the fallen human heart. So the story of our rebellion is complex. It has many sides and layers. So much so that Jesus couldn't address it all in one story. So much so that for Jesus to say, this is what it means for me to look for a lost person. He has to tell three stories in a row that look at lostness from a different angle in each one, that tell us that lostness is this complex thing that we're lost in. Jesus had to answer this with three stories. At the start, I spoke about this book,

Tim Keller's book, *The Prodigal God*, and how it has led a lot of Christians to ask, which of the two sons am I? Am I the younger son or the older one? And that's a good and useful question to ask, because it helps you understand how you might misunderstand the gospel, God's offer of grace to you. But the third story here, the third parable, is not the story in its entirety, because the gospel, the good news of salvation through Christ, is bigger than the third story in this chapter. The gospel needs the first two stories as well. To grasp the gospel, you need to think of yourself as God's child, but also as God's sheep, and also as God's gold. And the reason that you have to do that is because of, precisely because of what God says to you and what God offers you in the gospel. In the gospel, what God offers to you about himself and what God says to you is, I am the good shepherd, and you are my sheep. And in the gospel, God says to us, I am your creator, and you are my image. You are like the coin that I've stamped my likeness upon, and therefore I am pursuing you and redeeming you when that image is scuffed and scratched and distorted by sin. I want to polish that and restore that image.

I am your creator. You are the image of God. But also in the gospel, God says to us in Christ, I am your true, your heavenly Father, and you are my children, and I love you as sons and daughters. And to get that, if we read these three stories and see why Jesus told them then in this back-to-back way, I think that becomes far clearer to us and will lead us to worship God and to value his gospel more clearly. Amen. Let's pray together.

Our Father God, as we think about the gospel, as we look to what Jesus has told us about what it means to be lost, to be distant from you, to be far from you, and not to know you as Father, and not to know your Son, Jesus as Savior, and Lord. We're thankful for the wisdom of Christ in how he has explained this to us in Luke 15. Lord, we have been shown by him that you love and pursue your lost sheep, those who go astray, those who wander away from you out of thoughtlessness, not in a conscious, deliberate way, and yet who become lost. We're also thankful for what Jesus teaches us about the woman whose coin was lost. And we're thankful that you see us as human beings, as your image, as something that you would want to redeem, something that is valuable to you, something that you would want to restore to the glory that you intended it to have. And Lord, also, as we think of what you tell us about yourself as our Father, and us as your children, those whom you made to obey you, and to know you, and to love you. And yet we're made aware of how we rebel against you, and how we are not good sons or daughters without your grace to change us. We're thankful that you are a God who receives us and forgives us, who doesn't expect us to become slaves, a God who restores us as sons and daughters, who puts the best robe on our backs, and puts a ring on our finger, who receives us, and who is overjoyed. We're thankful for all of this, and we pray that as you help us to understand what it means to be lost better, we also pray that you would help us to understand what it means to be found. We pray that you would help us to understand this through your word, and also we pray that you would help us to know that in our own experience. Pray especially if we are aware of ourselves before you tonight, as lost and as far from you, whether like a sheep or a coin or a son. We pray that you would pursue us, that you would come looking for us. We thank you that you've done that in Christ. So Lord, please help us to know that in our own experience as well. We pray this in his name. Amen.

[36 : 31] Our closing psalm is, again, Psalm 119. We're singing verses 172 to 176.

My tongue of thy most blessed word shall speak, and it confess, because all thy commandments are perfect righteousness. The psalm that ends, this is the Psalm 119, the longest psalm in the

Bible, which ends with this acknowledgement that I, like a lost sheep, went astray, thy servants seek and find. For thy commandments I suffered not to slip out of my mind. The tune is Balerna, and we're going to stand and sing, and we'll remain standing for the benediction.

Amen.

And it confess Because all thy commandments Are perfect righteousness Let thy strong hand Make help to me Thy priests and star My choice I long for thy salvation Lord And in thy glory O let my soul In an ambition Give graces Unto thee And let thy judgments Gracious Be helpful unto me I like a lost sheep Wends astray Thy servants seek and fight For thy commands I suffer not [39 : 47] To slip out of my mind Now may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ The love of God the Father And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit Rest on and remain with each of you Now and alwaysatively