

# Luke 15:1-7

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[ 0 : 00 ] And turn to Luke chapter 15. Luke chapter 15. And so, I'm trying to preach Christianity is Jesus Christ.

You'll be thankful, I hope to know that Christianity is not a set of rules or a philosophy. You should never confuse Christianity with the institutional church.

Christianity is the person of Jesus Christ. And when we open this passage this evening, we find that the person of Jesus, Jesus is in trouble again, isn't he?

One of the extraordinary things that you find about the adult life of Jesus is that he's nearly always in trouble. He's in trouble with his family. He seems to be always in trouble with the local clergy. He's in trouble with his followers at times. But by far the most deep resentment and hostility towards Jesus comes from those who are seriously religious.

[ 1 : 27 ] There are some exceptions to that. But you can almost describe the gospel as a sliding scale. In a sliding scale where the more we move to religious observance, the more opposition there is to Jesus.

I think you see that. Because Jesus kept doing things, he kept saying things, that just didn't sit comfortably with the religious observance of his day. Of the Pharisees.

And what annoyed them so much was not that Jesus spoke as though he was God in the flesh, nor that he did mighty miracles without their permission.

That was bad enough. The problem was he did these things at the wrong times, in the wrong place, with the wrong people. So he cast out demons in the middle of a church service.

It's something that's very, very un-Presbyterian, isn't it? He healed people on the Sabbath. A day of no work. And Jesus did work according to them. Not just once or twice so that it could be overlooked.

[ 2 : 32 ] But repeatedly, as if he was making a point which he was. He reached out and touched lepers, the untouchable. But worst of all, he seemed to spend an inordinate amount of time with the wrong people.

And that is where we pick up the story. Verse 2. Chapter 15, verse 2. And the Pharisees of the skies grumbled, saying, This man received sinners and eats for them.

Now we have to say that we tax collectors and sinners, tax collectors have never been rehabilitated. In every culture, tax collectors remain the same, disliked.

Tax collectors and sinners were all drawing the item. If you work for the Inland Revenue, I'm sorry. It's an unfair shot. You can get me back at the end of the year, I suppose. Now, let's go back to the passage.

The tax collectors and sinners, can you see it? They are drawing near to him. Verse 1. But the Pharisees and the scribes murmured, they grumbled, saying, This man received sinners and eats with them.

[ 3 : 37 ] So the problem for the clergy was not just that Jesus was spending time with these people, he seems to like them. And what galled them was that Jesus wasn't treating them, wasn't treating the kind of religious people with the dignity they felt they obviously deserved.

He wasn't observing the usual distinctions that there were that had become so important. He seemed to accept and love people irrespective of their background and irrespective of their future potential.

So they did what all religious people do when confronted with something that they don't like. Can you see it? In verse 2. What do all religious people do when they're confronted by something that they don't like?

They grumble. They murmur. You've just got to spend about six months in any church to find that out. But the truth is, Jesus does not feel comfortable with one kind of person or with one class of person or another.

The problem is all those well-practiced distinctions that make our city go round, they are just irrelevant to him. Or more accurately, they are a hindrance to his true purpose.

[ 4 : 54 ] All those things that maybe we have carefully crafted our own identity, our capacity of what we can do, our little cliques, our core competencies, Jesus sees through them and he sees the real you and me.

The failure of the Pharisees is not a moral failure, it's not a religious failure, it is a failure to completely understand what Jesus is there to do. It's a failure to understand his life and his ministry. And that is why this parable is so important. Because in this short story, Jesus takes us right to the heart for the reason that he came into the world.

for why he dies on the cross and why he rises again. And I don't think in Luke's gospel particularly there are any words that describe so simply and so movingly when you meditate on them his own understanding of what he's doing.

So the parable has got two parts. The first part is in verses 4 and 5 which speak of the joy of rescue. Is that verse 5? Verse 4. What man of you, which one of you, having a hundred sheep, if he's lost one of them, does not leave the 99 in the open country and go after the one that is lost until he finds it.

[ 6 : 14 ] And when he's found it, he lays it on his shoulders rejoicing. It's a very simple story, isn't it? It's a very simple story of search and rescue.

But it's no ordinary rescue. It's a sheep that's gone missing. And every person in Jesus' audience knows that when a sheep goes missing, that sheep is not going to find its own way home by itself. Unlike Mary's little lamb. It will not find its own way home unless the shepherd goes out. You know that, don't you? That sheep, when it leaves the flock and goes out on its own, if nobody goes to get it, it will very quickly become somebody's dinner.

For anyone of a number of hungry predators. And this immediately has a jarring note, doesn't it, for Jesus' listeners. Why?

Because they knew the Old Testament. And they knew that the Lord is my shepherd. They knew that God is the shepherd. They knew that the Lord is my shepherd more times than we ever will.

[ 7 : 22 ] But for them, when they said the Lord is my shepherd, it was a great source of pride. It comes to complete shock to them to think that Jesus thinks that they may have gone astray.

Let alone be lost. And what Jesus is doing is saying, all that you know of the God of the Old Testament, that is true of me. I have come from God, from heaven, into this world.

To rescue men and women, boys and girls who are lost. The reason behind my miracles, the reason behind my teaching, the reason I'm speaking to you is because God is searching you to bring you back to himself.

You see, God is not a detached observer, is he? Watching from a distance. He doesn't wait to be asked before he begins caring for us. And the proof of that is where?

It is in the life and the death and the resurrection of Jesus. And you can tell how seriously God takes our lostness by the fact that he sends Jesus to live and die for us.

[ 8 : 28 ] He must think that we are in serious danger. We use this idea, don't we, of being lost in a host of different ways. It's possible to go to an art gallery, isn't it, and get lost in all the beauty.

But that is not what Jesus means here. It's possible to read a really great book and get lost in the book for an afternoon. But that's not what Jesus means here.

It's possible to take a walk in the beauty of the countryside and be lost in the beauty of creation. But that is not what he means by lost here. No, Jesus seems to think our lostness demands rescue.

And we are very familiar with people being rescued. So do you remember earlier a few weeks ago the explorer Henry Worsley died in the Antarctica. He was exploring the Antarctica and he was lost. Yesterday four British rowers have been rescued after becoming stranded in the mid-Atlantic ocean for more than 16 hours when their boat capsized. What they were doing there, I don't know, in the middle of the Atlantic ocean but they were there.

[ 9 : 39 ] On Tuesday, you might have seen the video, a mother and her toddler drove their car into an Amsterdam canal. I don't know if you've seen the video have you seen it?

And bystanders amazingly dived into the canal. I don't know if they're cleaner than the Brent but they dived into the canal and rescued the mother and her toddler.

Now if the four British rowers had not been rescued they would have been lost. If the passers-by had not jumped into the canal in Amsterdam the mother and toddler would have been lost.

Unless someone rescued them they would perish. That's what Jesus is talking about here. That's the point. This is what Jesus has come to do. But unless somebody goes after the sheep the sheep perishes.

This is what he's come to do. He's come to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves to search for us and to find us and to bring us home to God. So when you look at the life and the death of Jesus Christ you see the love of God in action.

[10:52] I don't know if you've ever really thought of what a remarkable thing it is. That God should send his son to the world to seek for you and for me. That everything Jesus went through is because we have cut ourselves off from God.

And it is not God who is lost. Jesus is like a shepherd searching, searching, searching because he knows if he doesn't find the sheep the sheep will perish.

I'm not sure why you came to church this morning maybe just this evening maybe just have it. But ultimately spiritually speaking the reason you came to church this evening is because God is diligently searching for you.

The fact that you are here means that God is drawing you to himself. The difficulty is like the Pharisees. We spend so much time pretending that actually we're not lost.

It's so easy today to grow comfortable with our lostness. Our food is fast and plentiful. Our homes are comfortable and very expensive. We have gadgets to simplify and simultaneously complicate our lives.

[12:01] We have medicine to prolong our lives. And entertainment to dull any vestige of hunger for God and longing for him. But I think one of the marks of our lostness is this kind of spiritual drifting in our culture.

Douglas Copeland speaks of a generation that has grown up that has no use and no time for God that moves between active consuming and compulsive television watching and apathy.

Life is lived between the demands of our advertising and our urges. And I think there's many people who feel that. Many of your friends and work colleagues and neighbours many people who feel this profound sense of disconnectedness with God that life is not what it was meant to be.

They were made for something greater. We've got no responsibilities, no commitments, no purpose, but no hope. We're free to think not too hard about anything in particular and we emulate the morality of whatever the latest movie film is.

A generation of young people have grown up where death is funny and nothing is important. I read this week from one writer who listened to this that says this, we are told that we can be anything we want to be but we have no particular reason to be anything in particular.

[13:34] Isn't that brilliant? We are told that we can be anything we want to be but we have no particular reason to be anything in particular. And so our friends, our colleagues, our neighbours, maybe our families drift from one peak experience to the next with that defensive anthem I'm not hurting anyone.

And we've developed, haven't we, as a culture, lots of clever little mechanisms to deal with our lostness. So one of the ways that people do that is they kind of draw themselves a new map. They configure reality with themselves at the centre of it. I know my map tells me I'm not lost. One of the maps is spirituality, people have that, don't they?

where I alleviate my lostness by going through a number of spiritual exercise which are basically designed to make me feel better about myself. Instead of acknowledging I am lost.

And I need to be rescued by the shepherd. I devote myself to different spiritual activities. I think it's more difficult, isn't it?

[14:50] It seems to me to be more difficult in talking to those people who think of themselves as spiritual to come to terms with the fact with what Jesus says here that we are lost.

Another map, let me call it is self. What we do here is we make the goal of human life for me. And I myself, I am the ultimate object of allegiance.

And when that happens, when we put ourselves right at the center, my deep longing for God that every human being has, is replaced with a desire for my emotional well-being. Sin becomes

addiction.

My longing for God becomes pathology. And I become anesthetized. My senses are dull to the very things that I need to listen to. And I become a little lost sheep who's being retooled emotionally to deal with my anxiety.

And I think that's why the words of Jesus tonight are so important for us. In Jesus' mind, we are all sheep. And we have erred and strayed from his ways like lost sheep.

[16:06] And we've put a distance between ourselves and God and we are lost. And that is why he says he is calm. And what does he do when he finds the sheep?

I'm told often that when people find lost sheep, the sheep refuses to budge. You've seen that in me with the sheep on the edge of the cliff. And it just refuses to move.

And the sheep clings for whatever it's stuck in. So what does Jesus do when he finds us? Verse 5, can you see that? He lays us on his shoulders rejoicing. The shepherd has gone to great risk to find this wayward sheep.

You see, God doesn't look at us and say, here's a self-help manual. Help yourself. He comes to us and he finds us where we are. And when he finds us, that is not the end of it.

He picks us up and he puts us on his shoulders and he takes us back home rejoicing. Rejoicing.

And Jesus carries us on his shoulders the entire distance back to the fold.

[17:06] In other words, the measure of Jesus' burden is the exact measure of our lostness. Can you see that? The measure of Jesus' burden is the exact measure of our lostness.

He carries us back to God the distance we have strayed. His shoulders bear the burden of our guilt, all of it. And you will know that if you read this gospel to the end, what it cost Jesus to bear us and to bear us and we are told that as he was nailed to the cross he shouldered our sin, he shouldered our guilt.

All that we've done to push God away Jesus shouldered. It is by his death we are rescued, it is by his death that we're forgiven, it is by his death that we're brought home to God.

And yet the most remarkable thing about these words is that he tells us that he does it for joy. Do you see that he puts it on his shoulders rejoicing.

Jesus knew what it would cost him to rescue the lost sheep, but for him it's the opposite of dull and tedious, it brings joy and rejoicing. Yes he knows, there's going to be the agony of the cross, but he knows that through that agony of the cross he will bring delight to God and delight to him by saving us from being lost forever.

[18:35] So let me speak to us who are regulars. I want to ask you, does it bring you joy and delight when you see someone who is moving from being lost to being found?

And are there people who you know who are wandering, who have maybe not been in church for a few weeks, and actually they are drifting away.

They're not following through on their spiritual commitments. And if you are following Jesus, I want to encourage you to go after them in English way, and to get them, and to bring them back, not because of the joy it's going to bring you, though it will bring you joy, won't it?

No, for the joy it will bring them, but for the joy it will bring God. This is the point, there is joy in heaven because God delights in every single one of his people. He doesn't want to see any one of us lost.

God sent his son to rescue us, and even though it cost him his life, Jesus loves to do the will of the father. That's the joy of the rescue. Secondly, more briefly, there's the joy of restoration.

[19:53] Can you look with me at verse 6 and 7? And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbours saying to them, rejoice with me, for I found my sheep that was lost.

Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance, or ninety-nine people who think they don't need repentance.

Here's another side of being rescued. We've done nothing to force God's hand to search for us, except by becoming lost. And God sends his son to search for us, but when he finds us, he doesn't drag us back against our will.

To be brought back to God means to repent of our sin. It means to give up our self-made maps. It means to surrender to Jesus Christ.

It means despite my abilities and capabilities and earnings I have lost, it is what the Bible means by sin. It means to give up our self-made maps. I met an American minister at lunch this week in

Covent Garden and I was supposed to pick the restaurant, we were going to go to Five Guys, the burger place.

[ 21 : 12 ] And anyway, after about ten minutes of walking around Covent Garden, the American man said to me, you don't know where you're going, do you? And I said, no. And I said, he said, well do you think we should look?

I said, I'm sure it's around here. So we walked on another five to ten minutes and then he got Google Earth or whatever it is, Google Maps. You've got to give up that at some point. I have to say, listen, I don't know what I am. I don't know any Covent Garden any better than you do when you're from Michigan. We could have walked for hours and I wouldn't have found it. You've got to give up the self-made map.

And that's what you've got to do if you will come to Christ. Despite your abilities and your capacities and earnings, you are lost.

That's what the Bible means by sin. And our problem is that the only place we see sin is on a kind of deserted man. But in the Bible sin is not so much a moral issue as a spiritual issue.

[ 22 : 13 ] It is not so much the breaking of a cold distant law but the breaking of a friendship and relationship with God. In all I've done in rebellion and all I've done in disobedience to God, it results in separation and distance from him.

That is what it means to be lost. And to repent doesn't mean to eat humble pie and turn over a new leaf and find your way home. No, to repent means to change my heart and to change my mind and to recognise that I have got myself into the mess I am in by my own self conceit and my own self will.

And it is not despair and it's not self loathing. It's seeing that what I've done has separated me from God. And I thank God that he has come and rescued me.

It is allowing yourself to be rescued. It is letting Jesus take you upon his shoulders and bring you back to God. And the great truth tonight is this.

It doesn't matter how far you've wandered tonight. It doesn't matter how deeply entangled you are in the thing that you are entangled in now.

[ 23 : 30 ] If you want to turn away from it now and allow Jesus to rescue you, he will bring you home. And when you do, and when he brings you there, it will bring you great joy in heaven.

We are in desperate need of rescue. Do you think that God will have sent his son to die on the cross if there isn't an easier way for him to do it? God cares for us so deeply that even when we've turned our backs on him and wandered and kept wandering, he sent his son to rescue and to shoulder us home and he invites us all to come back in a friendship with him.

And you may be thinking, what must I do? And it's very, very simple, isn't it? It is to say, I am lost. It is to say, I am lost and I need to be rescued.

It is to put your hand out to Christ and say, please rescue me. It's as simple as that. And yes, I have pushed God away.

And yes, I have wandered a long way off. And I need to be forgiven. And I need to be brought home. And all you need to do is ask God to bring you back because of what Jesus has done.

[ 25 : 01 ] And you will know the joy of rescue and the joy of restoration. Let's pray. Amen.