

## WINDOWS INTO GOD'S HEART

Luke 15:1–32

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I'm going to read just the opening couple of verses from that chapter, then summarize its contents.

“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.’ Then Jesus told them this parable...” (Luke 15:1–3, NIV).

The parable that Jesus went on to tell them consisted of three parts. A parable of one sheep that was lost from a fold of a hundred, of one coin that was lost of a company of ten, and of one son that was lost.

I like rooms with windows. In fact, when this church building was being designed, the architect came one day to the building committee and he had his conceptual sketches pretty much completed and he wanted input from us. I asked him how he felt about windows and he indicated that he had put a lot of windows in the building. I said, “But there aren't enough windows for me. I've got to have more windows.” So he went back and reconfigured and put in more windows and I, probably if I'd had a chance and it hadn't driven construction costs out of sight, would have asked for more. I love windows. I get claustrophobic if I'm in a room where I can't look out. Windows let the outside in and let the person on the inside look out.

Stories and sermons are like windows in buildings. The Lord used lots of stories. He knew speaking to people and giving them abstract statements about the love of God or a philosophical treatment of *agape* love would not really be remembered and would not reach the people. So

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when Jesus chose to talk to us about our human condition and about God's unconditional love for us, He chose to do it by means of a story.

There are three great short stories in Luke 15. The last of the three, the story of the prodigal, has been called the greatest short story ever told. It certainly has an O'Henry-like ending, with the unexpected tale on the end of the elder brother. There are two events that form the backdrop for these stories. One is that in Luke 13:21, Jesus has been teaching that the door to the kingdom of God and the door to salvation is narrow. Therefore, we're surprised as we open Luke 15 to find people flocking to Jesus who normally wouldn't be candidates for entering through such a narrow door. Here there were sinners and tax collectors. And the scribes and the Pharisees cannot understand. "If this door is narrow, Master"—in effect they are saying—"how is it that You are having such a company as this about You?" Through these stories, Jesus is giving definition to the narrow door: it is not a narrow door in the sense of lading us down with legalistic requirements to reach God. But rather, if you are going to enter the kingdom of God through the narrow door, you must lay aside the baggage and backpack of self-righteousness and pride, and come to God with humility, without pretence, with penitence, "Just as I am, without one plea."

Jesus' stories about God's love for the sinner are a radical contrast to a familiar religious proverb of Jesus' day that said there is joy before God when those who provoke Him perish from the world.

Jesus takes the reverse side and says, "No, not joy when those who provoke Him perish, but joy when the lost are found."

In these stories of Jesus, three things are lost. One percent—one sheep from a hundred. Ten percent is lost—one coin from ten. And 50 percent is lost—one son out of two. In a sense, these

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three stories of things that are lost all constitute one parable. For they are not isolated drawings set apart from one another, but actually three panels that belong together in one picture. The parables complement each other. We need all three parables together to give us a full understanding of God's heart, to give us a good glimpse through a window into God's heart. Therefore, the three parables—taken side-by-side as part of one panel—serve to amplify each other and each of them zeros in on one special aspect. But together, they represent the wholeness of truth about the Father's heart that Jesus desires to communicate.

Three things unite all these panels or these three separate stories in one:

**I. The first thing that unites them is the theme that in all of them, from God's point of view, we are lost.**

We as human beings. We as George and John and Mary and Susan and Ralph and Fred and Becky. We individually and collectively are lost. Here is where Jesus' language gets a rub in the modern consciousness, because that terminology seems so foreign to us. People instantly feel somewhat good and moral and outstanding and don't like that word tacked on them—lost. In fact, there was a campaign several years ago among evangelicals in which people were putting on bumper stickers that said, "We found it!" It was supposed to be a come-on for evangelism. I saw, and perhaps you did too, some bumper stickers that read, "We never lost it!"

What does it mean to be lost? I would submit to you that being lost must be understood more from God's point of view than from our point of view. Let me illustrate it this way: Just suppose that a young child is kidnapped and taken away and raised by other people. As the years come and go, the child has a dim awareness that it came from another family, but because it has been raised by whoever kidnapped them, they, over the years, will lose a sense of having been lost. The person who will feel a sense of being lost the most are the parents who day after day and

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month after month and year after year look for their child. They're the ones who know that their son or their daughter has been lost. They know it far more than the child will ever know that he or she was lost.

So when we think of "lostness," we need to think of it, first of all, not from our perspective but from God's. For God created us in His image, and because of sin, we are distanced by God. We have been ignorant of God and we have become unlike God, and to Him, we are that which is lost whom Jesus came to save. He says it Himself, "I have come to seek and to save the lost."

So Jesus tells us, in these three panels of the one story, that there are different ways we become lost. The sheep became lost in a different way than the coin. And the coin became lost in a different way than the son.

The sheep became lost somewhat unwittingly and wandered off one day. He began to nibble one patch of grass and that led to another and, hour by hour, it kept its eyes on what only lay immediately ahead and was short-sighted, as it became unaware that it was farther away than it should be. All the time, it was straying and straying and straying from the flock and the shepherd. The sheep started out never intending to get lost, it just sort of happened as it went along.

There are people who get away from God who never intended it deliberately; they never started out to sin deliberately, never started out to be away from God. But through a series of choices, and through friendships that had been made that pulled them away, or habits that were abandoned, or disciplines that were avoided, or dispositions that were not dealt with, they just gradually moved away from God. It wasn't because they were, so to speak, rebellious, but through wandering, they moved away. "All of us are like sheep," the Bible says, "we have gone astray. We have turned each to our own way" (Isaiah 53:6).

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There are those who become lost like a coin. The coin is not lost through any decision of its own. It is lost through someone else's carelessness. There are people who are lost in life who have been badly damaged through someone else's mishandling. There ought to be a sign put on every baby, like a package, "Special! Fragile! Handle with care." But there are babies, and there are children, and there are people, who have been abused in this life and have been violently treated by families and social forces and are lost, in effect, through no fault of their own.

Then there are those that are lost deliberately. The son, for example, says to the father, "Give me all that's mine." And according to Deuteronomy 21:17 he had a right, as the younger brother, to one-third of his father's assets when the father died. But he prevails upon the father to liquidate that part of his holdings, which would allow him to enjoy the money now. He is lost through his own personal choice.

What is being said here? Some get lost through intentionality. Some get lost through carelessness. Some get lost through their own choice. No, that's not so much what Jesus is saying. But He is saying that, in the dimension of being lost, all three of these components are involved in our life. We become lost through unintentionality sometimes, which may be larger than our own will. But our will is also involved. All three get in the mix. For some people, it seems that their rebelliousness is greater than their unintentionality. Perhaps it is through the carelessness of someone else. For others, it's their own carelessness that perhaps stands out. But all three are involved in what it means to be lost. We go away, never intending to. Or we go away flatly intending to. Or we find ourselves away and estranged from God because someone else mishandled us.

Mankind without God is not only lost, he is lost in all these senses of the word. Lost like a sheep. Lost like a coin. Lost like a son. You and I are lost in that way.

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### **II. The second great theme that unites all these parables or these stories—the three panels in the one story—is that God wants the lost to be found.**

Jesus answers the question, “Who is concerned with finding us?” God Himself is. That which has been lost is His. It is His sheep, His coin, His son. Each of these three shows us a different aspect of God’s work as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Jesus, the Son, is the shepherd who seeks the lost sheep. The third panel shows us the son, whom no one is seeking. Does this say that God simply waits until we get ready to come to Him and doesn’t lift a hand to help us? No. For there are three panels in the one picture and the first one says that God the Son came seeking. Jesus says, “I have come to seek and to save that which is lost.” Jesus says that the ninety-nine who are in the fold don’t need to repent—and here He is being somewhat sarcastic with the Pharisees who do not consider themselves lost. Jesus says, “You can’t find someone who does not see himself as lost.” So the ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent is not Jesus’ way of saying there’s another way to salvation other than being found by Jesus. It’s His way of simply looking at the ninety-nine who are smug and who are saying, “We don’t need You.” They cannot be found because they don’t see themselves as lost.

The prevailing idea of Jesus’ day is that God might possibly receive a penitent sinner, but never was it taught by the rabbis of Jesus’ day that God would go look for a penitent sinner. Here, Jesus again stands the religion and the religious ideas of His day on their head; and the Gospel says the shepherd seeks “until” he finds the sheep. The woman seeks “until” she finds the coin. And you can underline that word “until” because God seeks until.

Love is not satisfied by a favorable percentage between those saved and those lost. Love is not satisfied that 10 percent are in and 90 percent are out. Or that 90 percent are in and 10 percent are out. Love is not satisfied until that which is lost is saved, because people are not digits to

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God. It is not tactful to say to a father who has lost one of two children, “Well, don’t worry. You have another child left.” God seeks the lost because we’re all His children.

This week, as I studied this passage, it went like a knife through me because, if we’re going to be like Jesus, it means that the individual Christian and the church has never really shared the mission and the passion of Jesus until we become like Him and go and look for the lost—not simply stand and receive. It’s easy to simply stand and receive and say, “Christ receives sinful people.” It’s easy to wait for people to come to us. But Jesus says, “The shepherd goes and looks.”

That’s why we have ministry in this body. That’s why we’re emphasizing things like Intensive Care Unit and Visitation Ministry and outreach to areas even outside of ourselves, because we are looking to be people who reach, not people who just sit and simply receive. There’s a level of maturity that needs to take place in the body of Christ, where we not only do this hard thing of welcoming one another when we are strangers to one another—but go past the point of welcome, which in some sense is passive, and get to the vantage point of seeking. Jesus seeks.

Someone has said the woman represents the Holy Spirit with the church—the lamp looking for the lost. I realize this is a mystical and spiritual way of interpreting a parable and I normally shy away from that. But this is so good, I’m going to embrace it. It’s obviously the object of the Spirit’s activity to seek that which cannot help itself. And the coin cannot help itself. The sheep can bleat, and the son can come to himself. But the coin is unable to respond. And a man or a woman is lifeless and has no ability to respond to God, unless God’s Spirit draws us. The Holy Spirit holds the church as the lamp, going and looking for the lost.

The coin is precious to the woman in this second panel of Jesus’ stories. It’s precious, either for its own value or for its symbolic value, as one of the ten coins that were on the frontlet that was

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worn by many a betrothed woman or married woman in Palestine. It was given to her as we would give a wedding ring now. So she wore that and it commonly had ten coins. Evidently, one of those coins had slipped out. Any of you who have ever lost a stone out of your engagement ring know how desperately you go looking for that stone or that ring. That's how she felt about this symbolic item that had been lost from her normal appearance or headdress.

The search was not easy for her. Homes then weren't like they are now. They were small. The floors were not covered with carpet or linoleum. They were dirt-covered, with straw. There were seldom windows to illuminate the little one-room dwelling. The typical low door afforded little opportunity for sunlight to stream through. So a lamp had to be lit and through the dusty air, a long search had to take place as straw and dirt were gone through to try to find a little coin that had disappeared like a needle in a haystack. It suggests, again, the Holy Spirit with the Church—the lamp which is the light of the world, needs to diligently seek that which is lost.

Then the completion is the attitude of the triune God, as the father who waits for the lost to return. This picture is also needed to complete the panels. While the sheep and the coin may be returned without their own consent, it's not so with people. For we are not sheep and we are not coins. We have freedom of choice. And we're more difficult to reach. Focus on the father in the story of the prodigal. Really, this story is so often misnamed. It's called the parable of the prodigal son. The focus of the story is not on the son. The focus of the story is on the father. If you took "prodigal" in a positive sense, as meaning "extravagant" rather than in an "evil," it's really the story of the prodigal father. The father who is so prodigal in his love and his respect for the will of his child, that he will heap generosity upon him without coercing him or manipulating him into doing his will. The story tells us more about God than it even does about us.

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This father has suffered the loss of his resources and the loss of his reputation. But most of all, he had suffered the loss of his son. Hosea, the Old Testament prophet, understood how God felt.

When God speaks through the prophet and says, “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. I led them with cords of compassion and with bonds of love.” I think of a father pulling a little boy that’s in a little red wagon when he is small. It’s a wonderful father-boy experience to pull a little kid in a red wagon. God says to His child Israel, “I’ve pulled you in a little red wagon out of Egypt. Now you’ve grown up and you’ve grown away from Me, but I’ve never forgotten how much I love you as a Father, for I drew you with cords of compassion.”

The lost son makes the mistake of attempting to spend the father’s resources without the father, of taking the gift of life that God had given and spending it apart from God and without God’s involvement in life. That’s what it means to be a prodigal child: to live life without the Father.

As long as the son is away from the father, he is not himself. The great turning point of the story comes when the son comes to himself. You cannot come to the father before you come to yourself. He came to himself and then came to his father. Until the time he came to his father, he was lost.

“Lostness,” as I understand it from Scripture, is both eschatological and existential.

“Eschatological” is a word simply meaning “end times.” It refers to eternal destiny. It’s a “lostness.” There is a heaven and a hell and one can be lost from God forever. That’s eschatological.

But “existential” means this-lifeness. It’s what’s going on right now. That person can be lost now. Augustine said it so well, “The darkened heart is the far country, for it is not by our feet but by our affections that we either leave Thee or return to Thee.” We can be lost in not having affection toward God. Bruce Larson says, “The far country is the place where you become

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disillusioned with who you are.” You are in the far country at the point where you’re disappointed with the world and say, “Is this all there is?” and the Father says, “Of course not! Come home!” We come out of our lostness, out of a sense of “I am alone in this world,” to the Father, who lives and exists and wants us to come.

So out of these three panels of the one story of things that are lost, the two great truths first revealed from God’s point of view are that we are lost and, secondly, God wants us to be found.

### **III. The third thing revealed in each of the panels of the one truth is that God Himself rejoices when that which is lost is found.**

God rejoices when the lost is found. The shepherd rejoices over the lost sheep. The woman rejoices over the lost coin. And the father rejoices over the lost son.

Speaking of the father rejoicing over the lost son shows us in Scripture how we’re to even forgive one another. Because here was a father in the Old Testament who lost his son. The son was in a far country. Actually, he was down in Hebron and David was in Jerusalem. Absalom was there because of family problems. Very severe family problems. Finally, after three years of being away, David allowed Absalom to return to Jerusalem, but 2 Samuel 14 tells us that David refused to see Absalom when he came back to Jerusalem. He did not allow him to see his face and had him live in the city another two whole long years without ever seeing him. He brought him back, but he did not restore him to face-to-face fellowship. As a result, a very hurt son walked away in rebellion and great loss came to the family. There is something devastating about incomplete forgiveness.

But God the Father does not put us on probation when we come to Him. He welcomes us completely. The father gave his son a robe and ring and shoes and a party. There’s a symbol to each of these. Especially the ring—the sign of his authority; shoes—the slaves were barefoot but

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the people that were in the family had shoes. “All God’s Children Gotta Have Shoes,” the great black spiritual which expresses that truth, that out of slavery we come into the freedom of God’s children as sons. And we’ve got shoes. When Lincoln was asked how he would treat rebellious southerners, he replied, “I will treat them as if they had never been away.” That’s exactly how God treats us when we come to Him: “I will treat you as if you had never been away.”

I sometimes think when we read the Bible we don’t take enough time to picture the exultant rejoicing that’s there. When George Paul was small, two or three or four—somewhere in that toddler range—we one day were trying to communicate God’s truth to our children in a family devotional context. We had the idea, Jewel and I, of a role-play. George was given the opportunity to be the little lost lamb. We told him to go find a place where he would be lost in the house and we would come looking for him—we were going to act out this parable. We could hear which room he had gone into and which closet he had crawled into. I said to Jewel, “Where’s the little lost lamb?” and off in the distance we could hear, “Baaaa!” So we started out going through the house—every room, under every bed, in every closet, deliberately avoiding the room that he was in, stretching this out and milking it for all it was worth. “Where’s the little lost lamb?” Finally, we came to the room where he was, “Where’s the little lost lamb?” By this time, it was very loud. We were looking under the bed. Finally we said, “Let’s look in the closet.” We opened the closet and there was George, “Baaa!” we scooped him up and hugged him and made a big deal that the lamb that had been lost has been found. Somehow, I never think of the lost sheep except in terms of our little guy at that time. Having that exclusive moment of joy. And we were praying, “Lord, may our children never be lost. We would have to go looking for them.” But to God, we’ve all been lost and God goes looking for us.

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But these stories are a completion, for they show us that, while God is going looking for us in the person of Jesus, we still have to decide to respond and be willing to be found.

I mentioned that the story has an O'Henry ending. All of a sudden, Jesus' three panels close with this moment of giving an insight into an older brother, who was a child that never left home but who was lost while staying at home. He shows us—this elder brother—the most outwardly and inwardly never-to-be-admired example that we could select. A loveless life. Look at these characteristics: self-righteous—“All these years I have been slaving for you.” He keeps score—“I never disobeyed you.” He is critical—“You never gave me a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends.” He sees himself as blameless—“This son of yours.” He refuses to call him “my brother.” The father, when correcting him, says, “This, your brother...” and makes the son realize that the younger son is his brother, whether he will recognize it or not.

Saint Barnard said, “The tears of the penitent are the wine of angels.” That's a sentiment the brother didn't know. He nurses anger and unforgiveness. He refuses to go to the party. He's blinded. He never realizes that what was available to him all these years he could have had, just for the asking.

We have to ask, “Are these qualities in my life—self righteous, keeping score, keeping score in relationships, being critical, seeing myself as blameless, nursing anger and unforgiveness, and blinded. The joylessness of the elder brother is in great contrast to the rejoicing of the father, who forgave, who is set before us as our example.

Jesus gives us these two models. The model of forgiveness, with its consequent joy. The model of unforgiveness, accompanied by self-pity and withdrawal from life. Which model we emulate is our decision.

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All are lost. God comes looking for the lost and wants the lost to be found. Our great God rejoices when that which is lost is found.

#### **Closing Prayer**

Father, we thank You for these moments that we have with the Word of Jesus. We thank You that in the moments of our life when doubts come as to whether or not we are loved, Your Word—from the Lord's lips—comes to us reminding us of the delirious joy of heaven over our own lives and that You welcome each of us with outstretched arms and an open heart. And our knowledge of You will never be the same again, because of encountering the Word of Jesus, who tells us You are not only the holy God but You are the loving God who provides for our salvation. I pray today for those friends who may be here who have not experienced Your love in their own life and remain, as of this moment, lost to You and to themselves, that this will be the moment in which they will come to themselves and to You and experience Your love and let there be rejoicing by the angels. I pray for us as a church family too, that we as a body will have the heart of God for the community, the neighborhoods in which we live and the families, that we will be something other than passive saints, but that we will have the active shepherding love of God and the searching love of the woman with the lamp, to find that which is lost; that we too might share the joy of God the Father over things that are found. Then, Lord, we just take an additional moment to look at bitterness and unforgiveness in our life, in comparison of our lot with someone else's and the unloveliness and the damage to our life that are in those kinds of attitudes. Release us, Lord, through the power of Your Holy Spirit and through our own ability that You give us to reach out and forgive someone else. Release us from the bitterness we bear and the people we've written off and the relationships that we don't want anymore. Thank You, Lord, that the Father never has a moment toward us where He says, "I'm through with you," but

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in this life, He seeks for us to always come to Him and He seeks to restore the relationship. We pray, Lord, that that will always be our heart's cry toward one another. Help us to have the full joy of God in our lives and to know the beauty of a love that is not satisfied until the lost is found, until that which has been removed and taken from us is restored. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.