A Searching Question

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[0:00] turn with me to Luke chapter 15, page 1048. As we continue to think together summer evenings about some of the questions, some of the many questions that Jesus asked in His conversations and in His teaching, here we come to this chapter with a famous trilogy of lost and found stories. We're just going to read the first, and we'll discover a searching question here in verse 4.

Now, the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering round to hear Jesus, but the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, this man welcomes sinners and eats with them. Then Jesus told them this parable, suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them.
Doesn't he 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. 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 people who do not need to repent. So, I imagine we come to a lost and found story.
It's a question and a story that we can relate to. Something valuable goes missing. There is a search that brings with it difficulty and cost. And if there's a good happy ending, there's joy at the discovery. I once lost my sister-in-law's puppy when we were house-sitting. Here's a terrible story. I hadn't realized, leaving the little puppy out in the garden, that the side gate was open. Five minutes later, going to call him back in, nowhere to be found. Well, panic was the immediate reaction, followed by a quick family prayer. And then a desperate search and rescue operation took place. I won't tell you where it was, so you don't know whose puppy it was. But anyway, after about five minutes, we found a found said dog, and there was much joy. I didn't put him on my shoulders, but I did carry him in my arms, lest I lose him again. We can probably resonate with stories like that. Jesus questioned, if you lost something valuable, wouldn't you search for it?
[2:43] Well, I'll say, of course we would. But of course, whenever we listen to a story of Jesus, it's more than just a normal story operating at the human level, can we relate to this story as it speaks to us about God, about His character, about His grace? To rephrase the question, if God lost something valuable to Him, would He search for it? And again, the answer is yes. And how do we know that?

Because Jesus is God, and Jesus is on a mission to search and to find those who are lost. So it's a question, it's a story that we can relate to, and I think it's a story as well that resonates with hearts, and it always has done since the earliest times of the church. If you have a look at the art from the early centuries of the Good Shepherd story, you'll find, Jerem Barz in one of his books makes this observation, that there's a difference between the kind of images that we have today of the Good Shepherd story, where it's always sunshine, and when there's always smiles, and everything looks really clean and cuddly. If you were to look at the art of the early church, you would see a shepherd who was dirty and weary and bloodied. And Jerem Barz says it's because the early church always saw the cross in the story. They understand that Jesus is the shepherd and that the final destination, the way for Him to rescue, will be through His own death so that lost sinners can be found.
It resonated with people like John Newton. John Newton, the slave trader who became a Christian pastor. You know his famous hymn, Amazing Grace. He never got over that sense that God's grace would come to a wretch like him. He used the image of lost but found within that first verse. Even the day before he died, he gave this testimony to a friend. Although my memory is fading, I remember two things.
One, I am a great sinner. And two, Jesus is a great Savior, the Savior that sought him out. Well, we're going to this evening let this question search us today. So, as we think about the story, we'll

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also be thinking about what is God like? How does a person enter the kingdom of God?
How are we to relate to those who have turned from God and who are lost spiritually? Let's begin by thinking about the theme of this story. It's a simple story, but it's a powerful story. Those two motifs are there. The object of great value which has been lost, the sheep, and the search of great difficulty and cost that is undertaken. And then there is our question in verse 4. It's a rhetorical question. Of course, if a shepherd loses one of his sheep, he will go and search for it. It's part of his income, his livelihood. Each one is precious to him.
[6:02] Just to help us to visualize for a couple of minutes to recognize that the story of shepherding in Palestine, different from the story of shepherding in Scotland. In Scotland, you will find the vast majority of sheep are fenced in, so grazing is safe and they can be left and the shepherd doesn't need to tend them. But in Palestine, the sheep had to be kept in a walled sheep pen at night, and then the shepherd would come in the daytime, lead the sheep to where the pasture land was out in the open country, and would then lead them back at the end of the day to put them safely back in the pen. Well, obviously, on this day, as Jesus tells the story, a count is being made, and a discovery comes that one of the hundred has been lost. There is this moment of dilemma, what should the shepherd do? There's 99 that are in the open country, so there's a level of risk involved. But he decides to go on the search. As Jesus tells the story, he doesn't use many words, but we know that this must have been a long and hard search, because the sheep has obviously gone a long way. It's so tired, it can't really walk, so he has to put it on his shoulders. Maybe some of us have got a farming background, maybe many of us don't. For the people in Jesus' day, they were kind of farming people. They'd be fairly familiar with this kind of scene. As is often the case when Jesus tells his parables, there are many things that are ordinary, but it's the details that are surprising that we need to look out for. It's the exaggerated details that contain Jesus' point. The exaggeration, the surprising detail we find in verses 5 and 6, it's in the joy. When the shepherd finds the sheep, verse 5, 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 lost. I have found my lost sheep. Now think about it in a day when to gather a a community together for rejoicing would have involved a feast. The value of the feast he's about to throw is no doubt greater than the value of the sheep that's been recovered. But such is his joy that he doesn't care. The whole village is invited to share, to enter into his good news. One sheep has been lost and now it's found. He wants the whole town to celebrate. Another lost and found story, this time from closer memory. My friend will remain nameless. It lost his office keys some time ago and hunted high and low. Couldn't find the keys anywhere. Came round for dinner. We heard the story and he left. We prayed. Two minutes later, the bell went. Joyful discovery. The keys that were nowhere to be found, all of a sudden we're found. And here's the thing. So it's wonderful to share in the joy of that kind of story, to remember that prayer works. But here's the thing. There was joy, but as far as I know, there was no celebration party. There was no festival. There was no feasting for friends and neighbors, even though these valuable keys had been discovered. Jesus is telling us that this shepherd has a remarkable capacity for joy. His joy runs deep. He has a personal joy that he wants all around to share in.

As C.S. Lewis said, sharing is that thing that completes our joy. You find something that you want to celebrate, a nice meal, a good movie. There's that sense of completion when you pass that recommendation on, and a friend enjoys it too. So there is a surprise in the depth of the joy of the shepherd. But as Jesus tells the story, the surprises are not done yet because he goes on to explain his story. In the same way, there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents.
This isn't just a story about a happy shepherd. This is a story about the heart of God, about his saving grace, about the mission of God, about the joy of God in salvation.
And so as Jesus paints this simple word picture, he is highlighting vital truths for us. That the shepherd in the story, he values the lost sheep.
But our God in heaven places more value on sinners who have wandered from him. This shepherd goes on a difficult journey to seek out lost sheep. The gospel tells us that God in Christ Jesus pursues people out of love going all the way to the cross that the lost might be found.
[11:18] The shepherd, he shares his joy with a village. The God in heaven shares his greater joy with the hosts of heaven, whenever a lost sinner repents and is found. There's wonderful themes in this story. We're going to come back to them. But what we need to do as well is to move from

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thinking about our theme to thinking about how our theme is then applied to the audience of Jesus' day, or rather the audiences. Because Luke highlights for us that there is a mixed group who is listening to Jesus, and each one needs to hear the truth of his teaching, but they need to hear it in a particular way. So let's move on from the theme to think about the audience together. But before we do that, a quote I came across from a Michael Horton book called Putting Amazing Back Into Grace, a very good little book, he says in that book, grace is the gospel. The extent to which we are unclear about who does what in salvation is the degree to which we will obscure or make unclear the gospel.

At a time when moralism, self-righteousness, and self-help dominate in much of evangelical preaching and publishing, we desperately need a return to this message of grace. Okay, so that's Michael Horton's commentary. I guess that was on late 20th century, maybe early 21st century. American church, probably Western Christianity in general, but he could have been describing the first century of Jesus' day as well. The dominant religious teachers were the Pharisees, and their system of religion religion was one of moralism and self-righteousness and self-help. And so as Jesus tells the story, he's telling it in that context, and so he wants the audience to hear a different message, a message about God's grace, which is good news for all people, to make absolutely clear that when it comes to salvation, it is God who takes the initiative, it is God who acts to save sinners, at the same time making clear that you do not and you cannot save yourself. A lost sheep without a shepherd will always be lost. And he also wants this to be the message that people believe and that they pass on to the world. So we need to think about these three audiences. There are two that are stated, and there's one that's implied. And think about how do they hear this searching question, this story of the search. The first audience we meet in verse 1. Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering round to hear Jesus. This was a common label that was applied from the religious authorities, you are sinners. One of the really interesting things as you read the Gospels is how often these sinners, these religious social outcasts crowd around Jesus. If you've ever stopped to ask, why is that? It's certainly because he's a different kind of a preacher. The method of Jesus is entirely different. For a Pharisee, their whole system was based on separation, let me stay apart from you, whereas Jesus welcomes in feasts. And his message was so different from theirs as well. He spoke of grace and mercy, announcing that he was a spiritual doctor who came for the spiritual sick to bring healing, whereas the Pharisees spoke a word of judgment and condemnation.
But we can think about these tax collectors and sinners. They're like the black sheep of the family. You know that phrase? Well, the tax collectors and sinners, they are the equivalent of the black sheep within religious society. They just don't fit. They have wandered from God. They've wandered from His word. They've wandered from worship. And so, they are despised and they are rejected. So again, why does Jesus feast with them? That's the accusation. It's the muttering of verse 2, isn't it? This man welcomes sinners and eats with them. And why does this Jesus tell the story of a shepherd who is eager to seek and to find those who are lost? And again, it's because this is His mission.
This is the love that He has. This is Jesus doing the work of God. We began with Isaiah chapter 25, verse 6. We had that wonderful promise of the Lord of grace throwing this great lavish feast. And that feast wasn't just for a restricted number and for a certain type of people. It was a feast for all people. Grace runs wide. We're going to close singing a version of Psalm 23.
[16:29] Psalm 23, the shepherd's psalm. How is God pictured in that psalm? He is a shepherd, but He's the King, and He's the host of a great feast. This is Jesus. He's come to do God's work as the Son of God.

And so, what Jesus does in His ministry and in this story is He is inviting people into fellowship. And to be invited into fellowship with Jesus is to be invited into fellowship with God. He says, come to the feast, not on the basis of your personal merit and performance, but come on the basis of grace. That's why people crowded, because they were hearing God's message.
Or think about Ezekiel 34 that we read, where God the Lord announces that He Himself would come and be the shepherd. Later in that chapter, He says, I will send someone from the line of David to be shepherd. This is Jesus. He is God's King. He is the Lord Himself. And He's come on this rescue mission to seek out, to rescue the strays, to bring them home. He says it in as many words in John chapter 10, I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down His life for His sheep. So, this story speaks of a search and rescue mission, which speaks to the mission of God.

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Jesus says, of course, a shepherd will seek out the lost. So, for sinners, as they hear this story, this question speaks hope. Jesus isn't like those false shepherds who will take advantage but ultimately betray. He is a shepherd who considered
His sheep to be precious. And so, He brings a promise of salvation, a promise of fellowship with God to whoever would trust in Him, regardless of background. That's the first audience. The second audience, we find in verse 2, we've already mentioned them, they're the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. Again, we read the Gospels. They're often crowding around as well, but for a very different reason, they want to criticize. They want to complain. Here, they want to mutter, this man welcomes sinners and eats with them. In Jesus' day, Pharisees, religious elite, who are the people in Jesus' day most devoted to God's service and laws? You ask any person on the street, they say the Pharisee.
Who are the most honorable people in society? They'd say the Pharisee. But they were self-righteous. They set themselves up as moral judges over others. They're the ones who mark people out as black sheep so that they would be excluded, keeping distance to avoid being morally contaminated. Their message, you want to earn a place at our table? You need to be like us. You want to find salvation. You want God to be pleased with you. You must be sincere and good living and law-abiding and be just like us. It's a very different message, a message that divided, a message that condemned.
[19:53] And so, when Jesus tells the story and He asks the question, He's really challenging them and providing a warning. Jesus is saying, don't you see? I am the good shepherd. This is my joy to seek and to save the lost. If God has joy in rescuing lost people, if you claim to be the people of God, you must share that. That must be your heart. As He tells the story, He's warning them. You don't share the joy of God the Father.

You don't know His heart. You don't know His values. They're the false shepherds. They're the bad shepherds. They're the false shepherds. It's spoken of.
They're the false shepherds. They're the false shepherds. They're the false shepherds. They think they don't need to repent. They think they don't need grace from God through faith in Jesus.
And they need to hear that warning. So long as you stay in that condition, there's no rejoicing in heaven over you. And you don't have the joy of heaven in your heart.
You need to change. There needs to be humility. There's a third audience. This is the implied audience. This is the disciples. We can say the audience implied because the disciples were always with Jesus. He called them to follow Him, to learn from Him, to watch His actions, to listen to His words, and they will be sent to represent Him. I think it's important for us to remember that the disciples, like everybody else, they grew up in a religious society, in a religious system that was dominated by the Pharisees and their teaching. So, they would have grown up surrounded by this idea that religion involves separation, that religion involves self-righteousness. And so, the disciples need to relearn and to unlearn as they've now been called as disciples of Jesus.
[22:03] They're saved by faith in Jesus Christ alone. They're saved by a grace which welcomes sinners, which welcomes rebels. That was hope for them, and that's hope for anybody. And so, as those who are called to follow Jesus and who will represent Jesus, they need to be clear on their messaging, that they speak of grace, that they speak of good news, and that their message should also shape their method, that they should speak of their Master and live like their Master. Just as Jesus, as the Son of God, could speak of God's love and show God's love, so disciples of Jesus are to point away from ourselves to God's love in Jesus. But we're also to love like Jesus.

So, as they listen to this story, as they hear the question being asked, it becomes for them a call to mission and how they will do mission. Will they say no to the Pharisees' way of exclusion and barrier?
Will they say yes to this model of sacrificial service? Will they point to and celebrate God's grace as it's found in Jesus, the Shepherd King?
Well, having spoken about the theme and thought about the audience, it's important for us to circle back and to think about the lessons that we can draw for ourselves. I think one of the challenges of public communication, at least a good number of us here are involved in teaching in different ways, or preaching, or if you're involved in marketing, or any kind of environment where you're speaking to a mixed group, how well do we know them? Can I make my message connect with them? Can be really challenging.

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As we encounter Jesus in the Gospels, we encounter the greatest communicator the world will ever know. And he is able on this day to speak to a mixed crowd, a message they all need to hear in their own particular way. And he tells a story and asks a question that's actually big enough to ask a question of everybody in the whole world. Today, in this small crowd, this gathering, there is a message of Jesus for each one of us, regardless of where we find ourselves. If we identify primarily as a sinner, if we think before God we are rebels, that we've wandered from Him, if we feel that we are spiritually lost and far from home, there is a message of hope and good news here. If we are identifying primarily as a religious person, perhaps very sincere and serious about trying to please God, performing our religious duties, but perhaps we've lost a sense of joy, and the Gospel of Grace has been somewhat obscured, there is a message here for us.
[25:16] And if we identify with the disciples, if we know that we belong to Jesus, we've been called into the family of God and we've been sent out to represent Him in the world, there is a message for us too. Three lessons as we close. One lesson that God pursues sinners. Let's return to that truth.

Why does Jesus tell this parable? Because He wants to tell us something about the work and the heart of God. When Jesus eats with sinners, He is doing what God is doing, welcoming people to life with Himself.
And when in the end of His ministry, Jesus will go to the cross and die for sinners, He is completing that rescue mission of God. Dying so that we might live. Being punished so that we might be forgiven.
Going under the curse of the law. And so that we don't need to live with the fear of being condemned by that law that we might know God's blessing, and all because of His grace. And Jesus would have us to know we must see God this way. And when we do see God this way, there's great encouragements for us.
This story reminds us that nobody is beyond God's grace. Nobody here is beyond God's grace.
[26:43] The people on our hearts, the people that we think are so far away, maybe the people that we've been praying for for years, but there still seems to be resistance and hardness. Nobody is beyond God's grace.

And so we are to keep on praying, and we are to keep on sharing our faith, understanding that as much as we care that people be found by God, God has a far bigger heart and a greater desire to bring salvation.
We need to be encouraged by the fact that Jesus is this good shepherd. The one who seeks us out. The one who will carry us all the way home, and doing that with great joy.
God pursues sinners. Another lesson which is linked to it is that God is glad to welcome sinners home. You know, when we lose something, maybe you've misplaced a passport or a set of keys or a wallet, the level of joy that we experience upon discovery is always connected to the value of the object.
If I lose a pen, maybe we all lose pens, perhaps many of them, and we find the pen, our happiness is, you know, fairly small, because even if we can't find that pen, we maybe have dozens others around the house. But if we lose a puppy and find it, all of a sudden our joy is over the moon. Remember that Jesus paints a picture of extravagant joy.
[28:28] God does not save people grudgingly. He is delighted to extend grace. In fact, the author of the Hebrews talks about the willingness of Jesus to face the shame, the scorn, the agony of the cross, and to do so with joy, for the joy set before him. Jesus had joy in being our Savior, knowing he was going to please his Father in heaven, knowing that he was going to complete the work of saving lost sinners, and joy as he anticipated the future day when he would be with his bride, the church forever. God is glad to welcome sinners home. Jesus has joy in saving people.

And so this story says to us, we need to watch out for that, we could call it a Pharisee spirit, perhaps where we can be critical and judgmental. Perhaps we divide people in our minds, well, these are likely candidates. These are not really likely candidates for the kingdom.
We need to be ready to celebrate God's grace whenever we see it. And to be people and to be a church that's eager to extend grace and to extend hospitality and to love and serve like our Savior. Savior. And we remember, too, the message of Jesus that the way home involves repentance. As one of the Puritans put it, the way into the kingdom is through the low door of humility. And we need to humble ourselves to recognize our need of Jesus in order to come home. And the third lesson is simply to remind that God is the God who searches our hearts. Because this simple story is a God

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story, it's a story about our God. It searches us, it probes us. Helping us to ask, to reflect on questions like, have I received this grace from myself? Am I living in God's grace in the present? Will I trust, am I trusting the good shepherd to bring me home to God? Have I let God's grace affect and influence how I look at others?
Is the heart of the good shepherd seen in my life, in my conduct? Have I let God's grace fill me with joy? Is that what fuels a life of love and service? That sense of God's amazing grace?
[31:22] That the mission of the good shepherd would be our constant hope and joy, even as we're involved in that mission ourselves. Well, let me pray as we reflect on that together. Father God, we thank you for this simple...

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