

# Luke 15:1-32 "A Treasure-Hunting God"

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[ 0 : 00 ] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

Turn with me to Luke 15. That's on page 874 of the Bible in the pew in front of you. 874. Luke 15 contains one of the most famous passages in all the Bible.

Now, it's one of Jesus' most well-known stories that he ever told. In fact, there are actually three stories in Luke 15. Three stories about lost things.

A lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son or two, as we'll see. And we're going to spend two weeks looking at these parables together.

We could easily spend two months, but for now, two weeks. And I'm going to read the whole chapter. This morning, we'll look at part of it to focus on what we learn about God here.

[ 1 : 04 ] What we see about his heart and his character that's so awe-inspiring and encouraging to us. Luke 15 at verse 1.

Now, the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, This man receives sinners and eats with them.

So he told them this parable. What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, Rejoice with me, for I have 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 what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it?

[ 2 : 15 ] And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost. Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

And he said, there was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.

And he divided his property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country. And there he squandered his property in reckless living. And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country who sent him into the fields to feed pigs.

And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate. And no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself, he said, How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger?

[ 3 : 19 ] I will arise and go to my father and I will say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.

And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

And the son said to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. But the father said to his servants, Bring quickly the best robe and put it on him.

And put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it. And let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found.

And they began to celebrate. Now his older son was in the field and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant.

[ 4 : 21 ] And he said to him, Your brother has come and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has received him back safe and sound. But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him.

But he answered his father, Look, these many years I have served you and I never disobeyed your command. Yet you never gave me a young goat that I might celebrate with my friends.

But when this son of yours came, Who has devoured your property with prostitutes, You killed the fattened calf for him. And he said to him, Son, you are always with me.

And all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad. For this your brother was dead and is alive. He was lost and is found.

Thus far, God's holy word. Let's pray. Father, we give you thanks for your word. We love these stories.

[ 5 : 24 ] We need you to write their truth on our hearts. That we might know more of who you are. That we might understand ourselves. That we might see your love fresh this morning.

Holy Spirit, come and speak through your word. In Jesus' name. Amen. Treasure hunter Mel Fisher and his team gave over 16 years of their lives to the search for the Atosha with no reward at all. The Atosha was a Spanish galleon. A really big ship that was loaded with treasure, gold and silver and priceless gems.

Returning to Spain when it crashed in 1622 between Cuba and Florida. It sank 55 feet below sea level.

And for over 350 years, no one could find it at all. Until, in 1985, Fisher's son Kane radioed up to headquarters with the exciting news.

[ 6 : 37 ] In year 17, they'd found it. But the ship was there after all. Took them a lot longer to find their treasure than it did for our kids this morning, thankfully.

But this is what drove the treasure hunters, right? This is the moment they'd been waiting for. What their hearts loved. What they gave their lives to. Over 5,000 days with nothing to show.

And then, the day they lived for. When pile after pile of precious jewels came up from the wreckage of the Atosha, buried deep at the bottom of the ocean, the haul cleared \$400 million.

You can imagine the treasure hunters were excited, or more. Surrounded by wreckage, but finding great treasure there.

That's the context in which Jesus tells these stories, isn't it? Luke tells us that Jesus is surrounded by wreckage that he deems to be precious treasure.

[ 7 : 51 ] And so, he tells us, because some people don't like what he's surrounded by, about God's nature as a treasure hunter.

Look back at how the stage is set for these stories in the first two verses. The first group around Jesus is the wreckage. What are they doing?

They are eagerly listening to Jesus. These tax collectors and sinners. Social, religious, moral outcasts.

People who have failed on life. Been pushed out of life by others. They draw near to be with Jesus. To hear what he has to say. It made me ask myself this week, are those the kinds of people drawn to me? Over and over, we're told how they are drawn to Jesus.

[ 8 : 52 ] How they love to be with him. And he with them. But the religious leaders find this reality appalling, don't they? We're told they are grumbling at Jesus.

About who his friends are. About who gets his time and attention. And so here is Jesus' chance to set the record straight.

To clarify that he's above this riffraff. That he's actually a quite respectable person and religious leader. But these lowlifes, they just won't leave him alone, you know?

Instead, Jesus doubles down. And explains the heart of God for the left out. For finding lost things. Essentially saying, you need to understand this. I'm here with them because this is the passion of God's heart. It's not an accident.

[ 9 : 55 ] He'll especially challenge these religious leaders that they're missing the heart of God. Most of that we'll look at next week. Jesus tells the stories of the lost sheep and the lost coin to establish a pattern.

A pattern we've all experienced at some point. The joy of finding something we had lost. Right? In each story, the same thing happens.

Something is lost. A search for that lost thing immediately commences passionately, diligently. The lost thing is found.

And an appropriate party comes upon the finding. Rejoicing. Celebration. Shared with friends. In both cases. And again, in both cases, Jesus clarifies that the point is actually about God's heart. Right? Verse 7, the end of the sheep story. Just so I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance.

[11:08] Verse 10, the end of the coin story. Just so I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents. That's Jesus' point.

What makes heaven's heart leap? For what occasions does God throw parties? God rejoices in the finding of lost things.

That's his heart. Like those treasure hunters who live to uncover treasure in the wreckage. God celebrates finding lost sinners.

In fact, more than he celebrates 99 upright people. Good kids who think they don't need God. And here's where this would have been especially difficult for the religious leaders to follow. Of course, the Pharisees knew God was forgiving, right? They taught that.

[12:04] All the rabbinic teaching at the time said, God forgives repentant sinners. The problem is what there was no evidence of in the teaching then was this God who seeks out sinners so passionately as these stories demonstrate.

Seeking after these lost people as a treasure hunting God. It wasn't there. But that's what's in both of these parables, right? The shepherd leaves the 99 to go look for the lost sheep.

Thou hast here thy 90 and 9. Are they not enough for thee? Jesus says, no. He's not satisfied until he can rescue the lost sheep, throw it over his shoulders and bring it home.

Jesus, are you really saying that's the way God goes after lost people like these tax collectors and sinners?

I mean, are we hearing you right? That's what makes him happy? It's what makes him rejoice? The heartfelt repentance of a lost cause rather than the dutiful obedience of a self-sufficient churchgoer?

[13:30] That's what he celebrates? Another question for our hearts that we'll talk more about next week. Is that what I celebrate? Do my kids know I celebrate I'm sorry, Dad?

More than straight A's and home runs and blue ribbons? But we've heard Jesus say it before, haven't we? He came not for the healthy, but for the sick.

He came to seek and save the lost. He came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. The heart of heaven is for the least, the lost, the littlest, the lonely, and the left out.

God is so passionate about these people. He delights in them so much that he even kind of has a soft spot for the left-handed and the libertarian. Not really.

But it's so important that we remember his heart. For the least, the lost, the littlest, the lonely, the left out.

[14:34] I don't have enough time in this sermon or room on this screen to read you all the Old Testament passages describing God's character as one who cares for the brokenhearted, the downtrodden, the oppressed.

His desire to rescue all those from all nations who are dying apart from him. So don't miss what he says about what brings joy to his heart.

He tells the older brother at the end of the whole chapter, verse 32, It was fitting to celebrate and be glad. Why? This your brother was dead and is alive.

He was lost and is found. The Greek word translated, it was fitting. It really pushes towards necessity. We must celebrate.

You have to throw a party because the dead is alive. The lost is found. We have to celebrate. But then the third parable raises the stakes just a little bit more than that, doesn't it?

[15:40] In a number of ways. Now, it's a son who is lost. A son way more precious than a sheep or a coin.

Now there's a son lost. And the man has how many sons? Two sons. Not a hundred sheep or ten coins, but only two and there's one lost.

And now the son hasn't accidentally wandered off or been dropped on the floor somewhere. He is intentionally, willfully lost.

And this is where Jesus wants to push us. Because he wants me to see not just God's heart towards sinners, towards lost people. But more importantly, God's heart toward lost will.

Toward me and you personally. Let's see how Jesus depicts this more extreme lostness. Verse 12. The younger son comes to his father and demands his one-third share of the inheritance.

[16:56] I don't want you managing what's coming to me eventually, Dad. I want to determine my own way. I want to set my own priorities. I want to enjoy my own life.

Most Americans in our culture of rugged individualism have experienced those feelings at some point in their life. Whether towards God or another authority in our lives.

I want to determine my own path. Regardless of what God's word says. Regardless of what church leaders or friends God has put in my life say.

Only I know what it's like to be me. I'll do it myself. I've heard those words, but we've said them too. In fact, the younger son leaves town.

In effect, revealing that he wants the father's things more than he wants the father himself. He's essentially gone so far as to say, Dad, I wish you were dead so I could have now what's coming to me then on that day.

[18:06] And in fact, since you're not dead yet, I want to take those things and enjoy them as far away from you as possible. I've got to get out of town.

Now that may sound to you as disrespectful and unthinkable as it should. It would have been worse in Jesus' day to imagine those things being said to the head of the family.

But have you ever wanted God's blessing? God's forgiveness? God's provision? More than you really wanted God himself?

See, at the heart of this younger brother, this prodigal son we call him, he finds the father's provision inadequate, doesn't he?

He runs off to enjoy reckless living in the far country, certain that it's going to fulfill him, hoping for something better than what he's got at home.

[19:12] Maybe you've believed that lie before, as I have. That lie that adequate provision, that fullness, that true life is found somewhere apart from God.

The lie is that the father's house is the place of inadequate provision, and the far country is the place of extravagant provision.

And so we long for a different spouse, a different car, a different body, a different income level, a different experience or situation that's where we will find life.

Or sometimes it's just looking at the brokenness around us that we're experiencing and thinking, I can do better. I can find better.

I can make a better life. I mean, is this how God cares for people who follow him and love him? I can do better. And you may not even leave church, but God begins to feel far, far away.

[20:30] You been any of those places in your heart or life? Maybe the far country is not too far off from us, huh? I don't know what it is that would help you see yourself here in the lost sun.

Maybe it's thinking back to your college years. It's usually a reliable go-to if you need some help. But maybe it's not quite so far. Maybe you don't have to think back that much.

Maybe it's imagining someone reading your internet history from the last month. Reading a transcript of your thought life from last week. Maybe it's remembering what you said to your parents last night.

Or remembering what you were longing for the last time you just let yourself go and honestly complain about what you were really feeling. But all of us have been here, haven't we?

And all of us continue to be tempted by the greener grass of the far country. There's something better out there for me than what I have here at home with the Father.

[21:43] And it's so important to see that. Because it's that extreme, intentional, willful lostness, separate from the Father, away from Him at any cost, that highlights for us the extravagant love of the Father in this story.

See, the one bright side of the far country is that in the end, it leaves you empty and longing for home. Takes a while sometimes, but it always does that.

We're deceived when we think that our better tomorrow is apart from the Father and His provision and His direction. And the son learns this lesson face down in a pigsty in this story, doesn't he?

As low as he could get, feeding animals he wasn't allowed to touch or eat. He's starving and longing to eat pig food. So desperate, at the end of himself and his own ideas, he heads home. By the way, are you still lying to yourself? Pretending pig food is steak? That you're really full? [ 23 : 01 ] Are you ready to come home? That's where this son got. By all accounts, even what he's asking for as he comes to plead with his father is entirely unreasonable.

Let me work it off as a hired servant, right? The father should have disowned him. Had nothing to do with him. Even in this culture, had him beaten or killed for his rebellion, he had publicly scandalized his dad in front of everybody.

But that's nothing compared to the way his dad is about to scandalize himself. This may be my favorite image of God's love in the whole Bible. Verse 20.

He arose and came to his father, but while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

He's piling on, isn't he? And the son said to him, here's the thing he's been rehearsing. We've heard it once. Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you.

[ 24 : 11 ] I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me as... Nope, that's part of the speech. We've already heard it. He doesn't even get that far. I am no longer worthy to be called your son, but...

But the father interrupts. I won't hear it. The father said to his servants, bring quickly the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead and is alive again. He was lost and is found. Party time! They begin to celebrate.

That's the father's response, isn't it? Don't you love that? God is not stewing off in a back room somewhere inside. He's waiting up late on the lookout, on the porch, isn't he?

He's not standing far off waiting to be impressed by the renewed respect and obedience that better come from this son if he thinks he's coming back around here.

[ 25 : 14 ] No, he interrupts that idea, ignores the son's plan to earn his way back, to work off his debts. God is not calmly walking out to kind of evaluate the situation, see what he thinks.

He is thrilled out of his mind, beside himself. He's hiking up his robes. You don't do that if you're a man in this culture.

He is running another absolute no-no, running towards this son who's coming back and then he touches him. Where's he been?

This unclean son covered with pig filth and he embraces him, throws his arm around him and kisses him.

It's unheard of. You couldn't possibly imagine it happening. He brings the best robe. Whose is that? It's his own. He's gone to put on a dirty pig feeder.

[ 26 : 20 ] Now you can't wear it anymore. He brings the ring and shoes of sonship. He's so happy to have found his lost treasure that he sacrifices one of his most valuable possessions, the fattened calf, and throws a party for the whole village to celebrate, right?

That's how the father responds. Has anybody ever responded to you like that? Have you ever felt God responding like that? Towards you? Some of you are like me and you're thinking, this father is crazy.

He's a fool. He's just gonna turn around and run off again. Take advantage of your generosity. Don't be naive, Dad.

What an enabler. Good. I hear ya. There's a whole conversation with the elder brother next week that is just for helping us with our hearts.

But those concerns don't slow the father down, do they? They don't stop him from loving. What Jesus wants us to hear loud and clear is that the treasure hunting God looks for willfully far country lost people too.

[ 27 : 36 ] Those who have run away from him. He sent his only son to make a wretch his treasure. He couldn't be more excited to have you home.

Because some of you feel like you've wrecked your life too deep. Too far away from God.

It's hard to even dream of sneaking in the back door to heaven getting some of the scraps off the father's table. When I talk to you about the grace of God you lower your head.

I've seen it this week. It's hard to hear. You've gone too low. You've given up that kind of hope.

And you need to know from God's word this morning that what drives God's heart is searching the bottom of the ocean for lost treasure. He shames himself to honor you.

[ 28 : 41 ] God doesn't have to keep his distance from you because of your sin. It's the way it feels sometimes with other people. But your sin doesn't defile him.

His righteousness purifies you. He can throw his arms around you and it doesn't defile him. You don't make him dirty. He makes you clean.

He sacrifices to restore your sonship. To have you back home in his family. And no one made him do it.

No one. He's not tolerating you. He doesn't begrudgingly say sure you can sleep on the sofa tonight as long as no one notices.

Just come in the back door. Maybe they won't know you're here. He's throwing a party for you. For you in all your mess.

[ 29 : 40 ] Before you've cleaned up he celebrates your return while you're still covered in pig filth. That's how he loves you. Maybe you've been unfaithful to your spouse and the guilt is killing you.

Maybe you've had an abortion and the shame is killing you. Maybe you've been divorced three times and the pain is killing you.

Maybe you've watched a kid wander away and the grief is killing you. Maybe you've been gone from God for so long that you're sure he's given up on you.

Maybe you're so low you've given up on yourself you don't blame him. Listen to me. There is a treasure hunting God who is running out to meet you throwing his arms around you sacrificing his most precious possession so that he can have you as his own.

That's how God feels about you. It may be free grace for us but yes it's costly to him. He sees his own son shamed and slaughtered on the cross so that he can welcome you in and so you can be celebrated as a son.

[ 31 : 06 ] That's how he feels about you. That's the heart of God towards you. He loves you like that. When was that moment where you knew you'd blown it?

What is that sin no one else knows about that you're so ashamed of? When do you see God look down at your name and just finally think that's enough?

Takes a marker and just a big black X across your name written off scratched out given up on you must be forgetting who's drawing the X and you need to remember this morning God is a treasure hunting God and when he draws a black X on your name he is marking the location of his treasure he's not writing you off he's putting a target on you making you the object of his affection the treasure that he has lost that he will not stop seeking until he finds it Father could that be true?

That you love us like that? That you don't just come after us in Jesus once but that you keep keep keep seeking after us Father would we experience your grace again today?

Grace that we could never deserve grace we could never work for love that maybe we've never known would we all experience that again today?

[ 33 : 12 ] Or maybe for the first time? And feel your arms thrown around us? Your robe covering us? May we feel walked into the party as a guest of honor to feel the celebration of God over us?

Would you do that work by your spirit? Would you take cold hearts and warm them dead hearts and bring them life?

Would you move towards lost people and find us because you delight in it? We thank you that you're like that.

We praise you for loving like that. In Jesus name. Amen. For more information visit us online at [southwood.org](http://southwood.org) Thank you.