

May 15, 2010 Florida Hospital Seventh-day Adventist Church  
Psalm 103:8-14 The Prodigal God: The People Around Jesus  
by Andy McDonald (Thanks to Timothy Keller and his book “The Prodigal God”)

One of my favorite days is the day before I leave on a vacation. I love that day for two primary reasons. First, because more than most days on that “last day to get anything done before the trip” I seem to be more organized and more productive than on an average day. And second, I love that day for the joy, the anticipation of the coming vacation.

I’ve had some of that sensation this week knowing that today we start a six part journey that is potentially life changing and more refreshing than a great vacation.

The series we begin today was initially inspired when we heard Timothy Keller give a talk at last August’s Leadership Summit. As he spoke I was intrigued. Dealing with one of the most familiar of Bible stories, he cast parts of it in a fresh light—a light I am convinced now from my research that is Biblical and nearly a perfect match with the content of the book Christ’s Object Lessons, but with current cultural nuance.

I encourage you to get Timothy Keller’s book, The Prodigal God, and digest it and its message. I think you’ll want to own it and loan it to others. If you aren’t wanting to take on another book then spend some quiet time reading and re-reading and meditating on Luke the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter as we invest today and 5 more sermons on this important chapter.

The parable you heard read earlier is where the bulk of our time will be spent. We know it as the parable of the prodigal son, because that is the part of the story upon which we have most often focused. But as we will begin to see in just a moment and as we will see more and more over these next few weeks the story will reveal two ways of seeking acceptance into God’s kingdom.

But let's hold back and not rush ahead, like opening words of the Do-Re-Mi song in *The Sound of Music*, "Let's start at the very beginning, A very good place to start."

Luke 15 begins with the religious leaders noticing something that is happening with regards to Jesus, that is to them, a problem. Verse 1 reveals this reality that confounds the church leaders. It says, "Tax collectors and other notorious sinners often came to listen to Jesus teach."

As we already recognize or will come to understand as we explore this parable, these "sinners" are the younger brother types.

These men and women ignore moral law

They scoff at religious ceremonial purity rules

They engage in wild living

They have abandoned the traditional morality of family and respectable society and are about "doing their own thing."

In contrast are the religious leaders known as Pharisees and teachers of religious law. These were sort of the spiritual elite in that culture. The teachers of religious law, called scribes, would spend their time trying to codify and get down on paper all the laws, rules and even rules about rules so they could know what God requires, and then the Pharisees were sold out to actually following all the rules!

It is important to our whole view of Luke 15 to understand that the ones who had a problem with Jesus, the ones who inspire these parables, they are the model saints of the day. The whole of their lives are committed to being God pleasers.

So as the curtain goes up and our chapter begins there are two casts of characters, two groups of people around Jesus—there are the tax collectors and sinners and the Pharisees and teachers of the law.

The religious group is particularly concerned because this isn't just a one time occurrence. The language implies this to be an ongoing pattern in Jesus' ministry.

“This made the Pharisees and teachers of religious law complain that he was associating with such despicable people—even eating with them.” Luke 15:2

This baffles the religious leaders. They’ve been watching Jesus work and listening to his teaching. His life of purity seemed, in many ways to outstrip their attempts to follow God in all things, but at the same time Jesus doesn’t just hang out with social outcasts they seem attracted to him. He seems like a magnet to these sinners.

Their parents had told them the risks of being guilty by association. They had heard that one bad apple can spoil the barrel. Maybe we hear Paul echo some of his Pharisaical background in a proverb quoted in 1 Corinthians 15:33 Do not be misled: "Bad company corrupts good character."

The Pharisees were as sure as any fundamentalist group is in any age that these “bad people” are the real trouble with our world. They were clear, again as any fundamentalist group is, that if everyone would be like them then everyone would be the good guys and the world would be trouble free!

Now Jesus has learned how to best get his points across. I love Clarence Jordan and Bill Lane Doulos’ description of what a parable is. Just inside the cover of their book “Cotton Patch Parables of Liberation” is this definition.

“Jesus’ parables are not innocent and neutral stories designed for momentary amusement. He did not use parables to convey common place truth. Quite the opposite. He clothed His most radical ideas in the transparent garb of farmers, merchants, and field hands. The familiarity of the actors and actresses within these kingdom dramas disarmed Jesus’ audience and set them up for His devastating message. He lit a stick of dynamite, covered it over with an interesting story, and presented it to them. By the time these ‘good’ people got these parables unwrapped, He and His disciples were a few

miles down the road. Chance are they were still able to hear the explosion.”

This is what we encounter in Luke 15. By the time we finish we will find that Jesus includes both groups sinners and the religious people in his parable of the prodigal son, but today we want to take note of the first two stories—the warm up stories, full of truth and necessary to draw his listeners along a line of thought climaxed in the third story.

“So Jesus used this illustration: ‘If you had one hundred sheep, and one of them strayed away and was lost in the wilderness, wouldn’t you leave the ninety-nine others to go and search for the lost one until you found it? And then you would joyfully carry it home on your shoulders. When you arrived, you would call together your friends and neighbors to rejoice with you because your lost sheep was found. In the same way, heaven will be happier over one lost sinner who returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven’t strayed. (do not need to repent) Luke 15:3-7

This sheep in this story is just like all the other sheep. Those listening to Jesus were familiar with sheep. They knew that sheep are dumb. They are genetically predisposed to dumbness. It wasn’t hard to imagine a sheep foolishly going after the next tuft of grass and then another until it was lost. Too foolish to keep track of the flock, too foolish to notice where it was going so it could get back.

The comparison isn’t hard to make. There are many of us humans that are like dumb sheep. We don’t try to get lost. Our sin isn’t so much willfulness as it is unthinkingly following the path of least resistance, dumb wandering. And the sheep is lost through foolishness but knows it is lost.

The silver coin in the next story is lost through thoughtlessness.

“Or suppose a woman has ten valuable silver coins and loses one. Won’t she light a lamp and look in every corner of the house and

sweep every nook and cranny until she finds it? And when she finds it, she will call in her friends and neighbors to rejoice with her because she has found her lost coin. In the same way, there is joy in the presence of God's angels when even one sinner repents." Luke 15:8-10

Unlike the sheep the coin is unaware it is lost. And this represents many people who are unaware and have no sense of their being separated from God—they are lost through thoughtlessness.

So at the very beginning of this chapter we are introduced to the first two ways of being lost—foolishness and thoughtlessness. In the third story the son will acquaint us with the third way to be lost, through willfulness and open rebellion.

How is it with my sin? Ask yourself. Am I just a product of the fallen world, pulled toward sin as just some part of my inborn nature like the dumb sheep? Or maybe I'm just the product of a bad environment and I can blame my sin on bad parents, teachers, or bosses! Or are my sin choices really choices of selfishness and pride and wanting to be my own God?

If we are similar at all I'm guessing all three are involved in our sin dilemma. Sin is deeply complex. It is deceitful, and tricky. It is subtle at times and concrete at others. It fools us when it's tide is out that we can handle it, that we can build fortresses and castles to protect its onslaught, but when the tide returns our castles, our fortresses of self protection are destroyed, flattened by its powerful waves.

Good news though, for it is also in these stories that Jesus speaks to our salvation from being lost.

These parables of Jesus make it clear that we will not escape being lost by our attempts to find God. Keller writes: "We like to think of ourselves as spiritual seekers, as honest inquirers....the religions of the world....all seem to agree that if we sincerely search for God we

will find him.” Millions of people who claim Christ still believe that by believing and obeying God’s law in the Bible, they can find God.

Many in churches today believe they searched for God and found him, and no matter how they try they can’t figure out why everyone doesn’t search for God and find him. They will even look at people they term “sinners” and tell them “I found God and if you try you can too. I did it!”

But the Bible, and especially these stories in the Bible turn that thinking upside down. They scream to us that you and I never find a God who didn’t first find us.

When that sheep had wandered away. The shepherd didn’t hunker down and say when that dumb sheep comes back I’ll open the gate of the sheep pen and let him in. NO! The shepherd, representing the Lord himself, goes looking, searching.

God makes the first advance.

It was taught by the Pharisees that before God’s love is extended to the sinner, he must first repent. Their view was that repentance is a work by which men earn the favor of Heaven.

This fueled the Pharisee’s and teachers of the law astonishment and anger that Jesus would eat, share a meal communicating acceptance, with these known sinners. According to their thinking he should permit none to approach Him but those who had repented.

Here’s a great couple of lines from the book Christ’s Object Lessons. “...In the parable of the lost sheep, Christ teaches that salvation does not come through our seeking after God but through God’s seeking after us...we do not repent in order that God may love us, but He reveals to us His love in order that we may repent.” P. 189

If the parable of the lost sheep who might at least accidentally wander home teaches that truth what about the lost coin. Inanimate, lifeless

coin can do NOTHING to be found, nothing to be restored to safe keeping, it is the owner who lights the lamp, sweeps the house and finds the coin.

It is only Christianity that teaches you can't search for and find God and reconnect with him if you just try harder, Only Christianity says that God had to come down into the world to seek and save us. That Salvation is and must be by his grace not our achievement. That is the message we need to hear. That could be the amen of this message because it is a truth that needs constant reinforcement in our heads. That could be the amen of this message but there is something more we need to hear.

If you are a follower of Jesus let this point sink in.

At the end of all three of these stories there is rejoicing because that which was lost has been restored.

The rabbis had a saying that there is rejoicing in heaven when one who has sinned against God is destroyed. Jesus says no—heaven rejoices when truth wins out when the lost is found.

Every person whom Christ has rescued is called to work in His name for the rescuing of others, for saving the lost. As the Father sent Jesus to seek and save what was lost, Jesus sends us to do the same.

Something's wrong with the church today, maybe its not that dissimilar to what was wrong with the religion in Christ's day. Maybe our Christianity has slipped to being about religion and moralism.

Keller writes: “The crucial point here is that, in general, religiously observant people were offended by Jesus, but those estranged from religious and moral observance were intrigued and attracted to him.

(Repeat ↑)

“Jesus' teaching consistently attracted the irreligious while offending the Bible-believing , religious people of his day. However, in the main, our churches today do not have this effect. The kind of outsiders Jesus attracted are not attracted (to us or our churches.)

“The licentious and liberated or the broken and marginal avoid church. That can only mean one thing. If the preaching of our ministers and the practice of our parishioners do not have the same effect on people that Jesus had, then we must not be declaring the same message that Jesus did. If our churches aren’t appealing to younger brothers, they must be more full of elder brothers than we’d like to think.

If you are here today and you are separated from God. You long for rest and peace there is one who is looking for you and if you won’t resist He will find you, He comes to you just as you are.

And regardless of all the things God followers aren’t, we are, in our brighter moments, aware that we are all part of the one human family. Some times we forget that we are one big human family, all children of God. There’s a song, written with good intent by Bill Gaither called “The Family of God” one of the verses says:  
 “You may notice we say brother and sister ‘round here,  
 It’s because we’re a family and these are so near;  
 When one has a heart ache, we all share the tears,  
 And rejoice in each victory in this family so dear.”

There is a special intimacy of Christian fellowship that is special but we must remember that we are brother and sister to all of humanity. Not just brother and sister in our salvation but brother and sister to all to the most profligate, flagrant, rebellious sinner. And maybe, if all were viewed as family and if all the heart aches and tears were shared maybe God could use us to find a few lost sheep, missing coins, and runaway sons.

We are one human family, messed up by sin, lost on our own, but once found by God we want to share that grace.

I want to close with an appeal to two specific groups.

For those who claim to be God followers but are hard on sinners and don't want to rub shoulders with or to seek and find the lost, watch out Jesus parable may be a nicely disguised stick of dynamite. If you think you've found God and now have him conveniently boxed, look out. Hopefully you will let God find you even in the church.

If you feel far from God today then I invite you to stop running and let God catch you. You can't fix your life. You can't get good enough to be worthy to come home. You are too dumb like a sheep and helpless like a lost coin. So I invite you to let God find you.

I invite all of us to re-up on this sinner's prayer.

Father, I give up. I'm tired. I've tried to find my own way—sometimes doing my own thing, sometimes trying to prove I'm worth saving by being good. I give up. I'm a sinner and I want to let you save me by your grace. I want to receive an trust you, your commitment to me and your follow through on making me part of your kingdom. I give up on me, my commitment and follow through and trust yours. As much as is possible for me to do, I surrender to you. I accept Jesus as my Savior and I want you to have your way in me. I just come as I am. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

Jesus wants to throw party after party after party to celebrate lost sheep found, coins uncovered, and lost sons return home and even elder brothers who come to the feast.