

## SPECIAL MESSAGES

### THE VALUE OF ONE

#### Luke 15

As I look at what God is doing for us as a church, as a community, I want to say to you that I believe God is emphasizing, and as your pastor I want to stress, two things in the new year: **prayer and reach**. When I look at Gather, Connect, Serve, Grow, it's the Serve element in particular. God is really pressing down the pedal of discipleship and reaching other people with the love of Jesus Christ for us as a church family. And I don't think that that can happen apart from a rhythm of kingdom prayer where the Holy Spirit is being poured out on a daily basis. It's got to be sustained out of relationship. I don't know if you've figured this out: If you follow Jesus, the biblical word for that is you've been saved. You've been saved, and you and I can't save anybody, right? We need the Lord to move and to work.

One of the most exciting things that's happened in recent years for me is the unity of Christians in South Florida. There is a genuine move of God uniting pastors and leaders in churches. It's a very clear biblical message and it's something that's been neglected. It's a unity that's birthed out of real love for Jesus. Church United is one of our critical ministry partners. Eddie Copeland, the Executive Director, is a part of this church, and I'm excited about it.

I was at an event where a pastor stood up and said, "You know what? In Broward County, 3% of the entire population are professing Christ-following believers." There are a lot of people that would say they're Christian, but according to certain criteria of real, lived-out, daily faith, just basic convictions: 3%. This pastor just made a passing statement: "What if that number jumped from 3% to 6%? What if it doubled?"

I have to tell you, when that pastor said that, something in my heart just jumped, like, "This is God." And that eventually became the big goal for Church United. Pastors and churches and leaders in South Florida are praying for God to double the number of Christ-followers. Not because we are about the number, but because we want every person to come to know Jesus Christ.

We believe that as that happens, there is a tipping point where the culture begins to shift and people begin to flourish as God pours out his grace on an entire region. That's what we are praying for. That's what we are asking for. Riverside, that's what I am inviting you into -- to be a disciple-making church. It's not just about converting people. It's about loving

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people in the name of Jesus, sharing the truth, and helping them with whatever the need might be as God enables us.

Okay, are you ready? Luke 15:1:

*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...”*

This is a powerful statement that we’ve just read. Jesus received those who were perceived to be the worst sinners of his day. Then there were individuals who attacked him for it. We read in verse 3:

*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.*

Now remember, Jesus is telling the story in response to the criticism he received because he welcomes sinners. Verse 8:

*“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? 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.”*

So, one lost sheep, one lost coin. What we discover here is that Jesus tells three stories, yet they really are one story in three parts. Verse 11 begins the parable of the Prodigal Son. It’s somewhat of a famous story. Some of you may be familiar with it. The word “prodigal” means extravagant, wasteful living. It’s a story, as we’ll see here in a second, about a son who wastes his inheritance and strays from his father. Just remember, it’s the third in a series of parallel stories.

*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 his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.*

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*“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! 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.*

When we hear the story of the parable of the Prodigal Son, a lot of us stop right here at this verse. We think of this amazing picture of the son who has rejected his family, who has left, who has wasted everything. In the image of the parable, he has left God and he has lived a very sinful life. He returns to God. We don’t always use this word in our day, but it’s a very biblical word: he “repents.” He turns from doing his own thing. He turns from himself and he returns to God. The picture of the father running to receive him and pouring out love and compassion is very stirring and very moving. But the parable doesn’t end there. There is an important climax to what Jesus is teaching us here and it continues in verse 25.

*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. 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.”*

I had the privilege of taking a graduate course in seminary with Edmund Clowney, who was the President of Westminster Seminary. He was in his early 80’s when I took this class and has gone home to be with the Lord since then. He taught a famous sermon on this passage. He said three stories that go together -- one, two, three -- whenever three stories are told like this, there is a progression, there is a building. The stories kind of repeat the same truths, then there is

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something in the third story that's different. There is a hook or a lesson that really drives home the main lesson of what is being taught.

He used the teaching of a Hebrew professor named Robert Alter to teach this and did something that was very vivid. He went to 2 Kings 1, which tells the story about Elijah. This is a little awkward, but the king fell in the bathroom and really hurt himself. He was on his sickbed, so he sent his messengers to get a sorcerer to come and tell him if he was going to live.

Elijah, the great prophet of God is not very happy about this. God tells him: "Go stop those messengers." So he goes, and the messengers come to him. He stops them to say, "Listen, God has a message for your king. Go back and say: "Why are you going to a sorcerer? Why aren't you coming to the true God to find out what's going to happen with your life?" So, the messengers go back to the king. They tell him the story and the king is mad. He tells one of his captains: "Take 50 of your men, go out, and bring Elijah to me." So they go and the captain yells out: "Elijah! O man of God! Come down – the king wants to see you."

Elijah does something unexpected at this point. He says, "Listen, if I'm a man of God, let fire fall from heaven and consume all of you." Fire falls from heaven and they are all consumed. This is not a G-rated Bible story. The king is really mad now, and he sends a second captain and 50 more men. "Elijah, O man of God! The king wants to see you." We've tried this before, haven't we? "If I'm a man of God, let fire fall from heaven and consume all of you." Fire falls from heaven and consumes all of them.

Now the king is upset. He sends a third captain with 50 men. You've been set up for this, right? He comes on his knees. "Oh, Elijah." He entreats Elijah and actually treats him like a Man of God, like an Old Testament prophet who calls down fire from heaven. So then Elijah goes.

There is this progression where you are looking for what's going to change. When Jesus tells these three parables: The Lost Sheep, The Lost Coin, The Lost Son – what stands out in the third story is that no one goes to look for the lost son. You have this urgent seeking for that which is valuable, that which is lost and this phenomenal rejoicing over finding what's been lost. Then you get to this son who is *really* valuable and no one goes to look for him.

Edmund Clowney suggested that these Pharisees are coming to Jesus, accusing him, and he has them in the role of the older brother. He is saying to them: "Why didn't you go out and find your younger brother? Instead of going to find him, you have blocked the way." It's a very powerful movement that teaches us the love of God and the value of one person. I'm going to give it to you in just a couple of statements.

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### 1. Jesus rejoices when someone returns to God.

We heard from Bertrhude and Priscilla, who made this statement: “ We have challenged one another as we have partnered together, to find what a win is.” They said, “A win is when we train a teacher.” They made that statement when they gave their presentation. I know there’s a lot that God calls us to do, but this is a win: **God rejoices when someone returns to God.**

Just about our entire married lives, we have gone to Dallas Christmas Day. We have had this tradition of our whole family going to Dallas. There was a Christmas where we were in one of the malls after Christmas Day, shopping. Our kids were really little and we lost one of our kids. I should say I lost one of our kids. I can’t even tell you the panic that swept over me -- the longest 60 seconds of my life. I became like screaming frantic. I believe we hear in this teaching and in scripture this reminder of the value of one person to God. That’s really the second statement:

### 2. Every soul is precious to God.

Every person is precious to God. This is a little tragic for us, because we are in a day where it’s all about numbers. I know when I give you reports and we celebrate I give you numbers. We do that type of thing, but sometimes we feel like, “Well, it’s got to be hundreds and thousands.” Listen, you are precious to God. **As believers, something that makes us stand out in a world that doesn’t value people is that you love people one at a time.** You just say, “You know what? Maybe God has put me in a place where this one person is consuming a lot of time for me, but that person is worth it. That’s what God has called me to do. That’s who I’m loving right now. That’s the opportunity that God has put before me.” I am praying, Riverside, that would fill your heart. I think in many ways it does. As we become more and more intentional about it, I think God’s going to do some great things.

Next, these parables teach:

### 3. There are two ways to miss God.

This is probably right near the heart of what is taught in this chapter. One is the way that is probably more obvious to us. You just go out, live wild, you party, obviously you reject God’s rules, God’s law, God’s will, and just do your own thing – the Prodigal Son, the younger brother.

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But the other is a very religious way. It's a very moral way. It's a way of keeping the rules where we somehow believe that we are actually earning our way to God. That not only keeps us from God, but it blocks the pathway for others. Perhaps the biggest condemnation that Jesus gave to the religious leaders of his day is this. He said, "You block the kingdom of heaven. You keep other people from heaven, because you don't enter in yourself."

The way we enter in is over and over in this passage. It may sound offensive, but it's such a freedom to say, "You know what? He rejoices when sinners return." Okay, so I'm a sinner. I'm not perfect. I have failed. Yeah, I am valuable. I am precious before God. Jesus has died to save me and in that place of brokenness before him I am restored and healed and I return to him."

Of the two ways to miss God, not that I want to encourage any of you to be partiers, please don't, but the religious way is sometimes the more dangerous, because it creates this blindness, this self-righteous blindness. So we want to rejoice, Riverside, as we see people return to God.

Finally,

#### **4. Sharing the love of Jesus helps us maintain spiritual equilibrium.**

That's a mouthful, but I want to end with this thought as we go forward. Think about this. This is where we started. If helping other people follow Jesus is part of what it means to follow Jesus, there is something critical in that continuum. You see in this passage how the Pharisees think they know the word of God. They are committed to it. They are committed to right teaching, but they are spiritually very unhealthy.

**There is this element where they are called, not just to be right, not just to be a blessing, but to be a blessing to others. When that is not in our thinking, when we are not considering others and how our actions affect others and are intentionally giving away what God is giving us, it produces spiritual sickness.**

I've seen it in 30+ years of ministry. I've seen it in so many different areas. I've been a part of charismatic churches and movements that got so concerned about the move of the Spirit of God or spiritual gifts or power that they were really spiritually unhealthy. If a lost person walked in the door, a person that didn't know Jesus, they just thought, "Wow, this is crazy." The lack of this awareness of a world that needs Jesus brought some very unhealthy things spiritually.

I've seen it in my own journey in Reformed teaching. Some of you don't even know when that means, and that's okay. It's a certain understanding of how God works. I think it's right. I think it's powerful. I think it's true. But if there isn't a focus there that we are to love other people, we can get in a lot of trouble.

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I've seen it in a way when Christians emphasize politics, where we become more concerned about a political agenda instead of a world that needs to know Jesus. Listen, the three illustrations I've given you? I'm for all three of those. I mean, I do believe in the gifts of the Spirit. I am Reformed. I don't know, maybe I'll run for governor someday. Who knows?

**We need Jesus. I believe the heart of the Father breaks for people that are lost in the mall and that he is calling you, Riverside, saying, "I want you to pray and reach in 2019." I think God is saying to you, "This is my heart. I will do this. Trust me. Believe me for great things. Attempt great things."**

**So, are you ready, Riverside? Ready for a new year?**