

## Sermon Series: Questions God Asks

**Counting Sheep – by Luke Edwards**  
**Luke 15:1-7**

**Boone UMC**  
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My name is Luke Edwards and I'm the pastor of KSC, the newest worshipping community of BUMC. KSC is a network of small gatherings focused on creating Christian community among those that have never experienced it before. I'm excited to share with you a little glimpse of God's heart this morning.

In one of my boring seminary classes a few months ago I was asked to look into the Old Testament origins of a quote in Jude. I was sent to Ezekiel 34, and the contents of this chapter have challenged me on a daily basis ever since. In Ezekiel 34, God mounts a case against the leaders of Israel, and it's not looking good for them. He leads off with a question, the latest in our sermon series, the questions that God asks.

God through the prophet Ezekiel asks, *"Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep?"* He continues, *"You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost."* It's as if God is saying, "Shepherds you had one job, feed the sheep." As leaders of Israel God had trusted them to feed his flock, but all they could manage to do was feed themselves at the expense of the flock.

Then God continues with a description of himself, a perfect contrast. He says, *"I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out... I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy."*

I read this and I just sat there for about an hour. My first thought was, "I hope I'm not a shepherd that feeds himself." My second thought, I probably am and I'm glad I read this verse now rather than ten years into my career. I'm a young pastor, less than a year under my belt, and if I'm honest with y'all 85% of the time I have no idea what I'm doing. How do you support a congregant going through unspeakable tragedy? How do you teach people about an infinite God? What do you do with your hands when you're leading communion? Seriously, it's a lot to learn. In just a few months of ministry I have felt the pull of self-promotion and careerism. Thinking about how decisions affect my career over how they affect the good of my flock. I've been tempted on many occasions to feed myself at the expense of what the church needs. Thank God for his word. While there may not be clear instructions on what to do with your hands during

communion in the Bible, in this prophesy God seems to be pretty clear about how to lead his church. It boils down to don't seek your own benefit, seek the lost. Seems pretty simple, yet when I look around I don't see too many of us doing it.

This prophesy of Ezekiel had a profound impact on the early Christians; it's referenced over and over again in the Gospels and the New Testament. It would have been impossible for Jesus's audience not to think of this verse when he told them the parable of the lost sheep, our scripture for today from my favorite gospel, Luke of course. Hear this word from God.

Luke 15:1-7 *“Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, “This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.”*

*So he told them this parable: “Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and 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.”*

Jesus is traveling across the countryside preaching the good news of the coming kingdom to the crowds. In his travels Jesus is connecting with some sheisty characters; tax collectors, violent revolutionaries, prostitutes, lepers. It's getting to the point that the religious folks are feeling pretty uncomfortable. You see the Pharisees had religion all figured out, they had it down to a science, it was pretty simple. Follow the rules, do good things, you get labeled righteous and can be included in the rewards of God. Break the rules, do bad things, you are labeled bad, and you are exiled from the community of God and can't have any rewards. This kind of religion made life pretty easy to figure out. It was really clear who was good and who was bad. The guys and gals that followed the rules (in public at least) were good. The guys and gals that got caught breaking the rules were bad. There wasn't much grey, just good and bad, in and out.

It's not all that different of an ethic that gets practiced in the American church today. I have had many a conversation with folks who were raised to think that people who drink are bad, people who smoke are bad. Whether their Sunday school teachers or parents meant to or not, they were raised to think that people who do bad things are bad people and you should probably stay away from them. I can personally recall youth group lessons that told me not to be friends with non-Christians. That if I did, I could lose my faith. I understand where they were coming from, the easiest way to teach ethics to a child is to make it black and white. So we craft our simple ethics to look a lot like the Pharisees. Church is for the folks that behave themselves in public, and the other folks can have their fun out there. Our pharisaical system seems fine. Amen cue the choir.

Oh wait, we forgot about Jesus. Jesus comes along and completely throws the Pharisees ethics out. Not slightly tweaking them, but throwing them on the ground and stomping them with his cool leather sandals. This is why I love Jesus. He's always making church people mad. Listen to what the Pharisees say, "This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them." So here is Jesus, this brilliant teacher of the law, this prime candidate for the religious elite, yet he welcomes sinners.

This word "sinners" in the Greek means "outsiders". The Pharisees have determined that because of their actions, these people are unworthy of belonging. In his parable, Jesus gives them a new name, "the lost"; thereby, moving them from a place of exclusion to a place of exaltation. You heard how God talks about the lost. Sinners are to be excluded, but the lost are to be sought after. When Jesus looks at someone outside of the church he does not see an outsider, he sees his child who is lost.

As you can imagine, this view of outsiders was not warmly received by the Pharisees. One commentary I read this week said, "Jesus' failure to observe such distinctions seemed to some dangerous to the moral and religious fiber of the community and disturbingly radical."<sup>1</sup> Jesus was busting the foundation on which the whole community was built.

Jesus proposes a new ethic. One in which the good and bad are all his sheep. Jesus proclaims the incomprehensible good news that in him we can all find forgiveness. No one is outside of the reach of His love, there is nothing that we can say or do that will render us unforgiveable. We must merely accept his invitation and find our seat at the table. He once and for all breaks open the gate to his kingdom, letting everyone in.

Yet somehow we the American Church find ourselves shutting the gate. Somehow we look around at the ethics of our churches and see we are looking a lot like Pharisees. We've created a church that is not welcoming of the lost, but one that is threatening to them. One young man at King Street Church told me this week, "People in the church are way more likely to fight us than love us."

When non-Christians aged 16 to 29 years old were asked, "What is your current perception of Christianity?" here's how they responded:

- 91% anti-homosexual
- 87% judgmental

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<sup>1</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *Luke: Interpretation, a Bible commentary for teaching and preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) 185.

- 85% hypocritical
- 78% old-fashioned
- 75% too involved in politics
- 70% out of touch with reality
- 70% insensitive to others<sup>2</sup>

Church, this is what we're known for. Despite Christ's best efforts, we have moved back into the religion of exclusion. We have moved back into the labels of good and bad, in and out.

But it's wrong. The people the church has labeled as bad are beautiful, it's just that no one cared to hear their story. Many of their stories are full of hurt, abuse, loneliness, anxiety.

Last week in the jail, a man told me that the hardest part of jail is not being able to apologize to the people he has hurt. This man who did some pretty terrible things to land him there, is not a monster, but immensely broken, burdened by his mistakes. What about the situation in Baltimore? How many Facebook comments this week labeled the rioters as monsters, dismissing the decades of crippling poverty and lack of opportunity that led to such desperation.

I wonder if we point fingers at others so that we won't have to point the finger at ourselves. If we focus on the brokenness of others, we won't need to worry about our own brokenness.

We are complicated creatures, reacting to the complicated pressures of our lives. Underneath the surface we are the same, broken people before a loving God. Can we quit fooling ourselves that we are somehow closer to God because of our public behavior? The good news of Jesus is that none of us deserve forgiveness, but all of us can receive it freely. In Christ there is no label of good or bad, just the label of lost and found children of God.

And God does not look down upon the lost as we do, no he places a disproportionate amount of value upon those that are lost. In the parable of the lost sheep the shepherd leaves 99 sheep unattended to find the one that is lost. How is that for mathematics, 1 is greater than 99. God is willing to risk the safety of his 99 to save the 1. How loudly does this speak to the heart of God?

Let's look back at the words of God himself in Ezekiel 34, "*I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak.*" God's heart desperately longs for the lost, he desires that all would come back into his flock. He is not worried about how strong we are, how spiritually healthy we are, he just wants us near him. And once we are near him, he will nurse us back to health.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/culture/10-challenges-facing-us-next-decade>

God's heart is disproportionately pointed towards the lost, is ours? How much time do you spend with those that are outside of the church? How many of your friends are not Christian? How many of our programs at Boone UMC are geared towards the un-churched? How much of our church budget is spent on those outside the church? Who do we value more, the 99 or the 1?

The parable of the lost sheep shows us the missionary heart of God. God goes into the wilderness to seek the lost. He does not wait for the lost to come to him. He goes.

Can you hear God asking us this morning, "Should not shepherds feed the sheep?" In Christ we are all sheep, as the church we are all shepherds. Seeking out the lost is not simply the calling of missionaries and clergy. It is all of our callings. The God that goes into the wilderness also sends his people out. We are not a people who sit in the pews and wait for the lost to wander in. Imagine if the early Christians had had that mindset. We would not be here today. We are called to imitate God in seeking the lost, bringing back the strayed, binding up the injured, and strengthening the weak. But first we must quit feeding ourselves.

Augustine describes our calling in his 46<sup>th</sup> sermon, "I shall recall the straying; I shall seek the lost. Whether they wish it or not, I shall do it. And should the brambles of the forests tear at me when I seek them, I shall force myself through all straits; I shall pull down all hedges. So far as the God whom I fear grants me the strength, I shall search everywhere. I shall recall the straying; I shall seek after those on the verge of being lost."<sup>3</sup> Seeking the lost is no walk in the park, its dangerous and toiling. It costs something of us. It could cost us everything.

In this post modern age where people outside of the church deeply distrust the church we can only bring people into the church that we are in relationship with. No amount of marketing, tract giving, or invitations to strangers will compare to building deep relationships with those outside of the church. Not fake relationships masking ulterior motives of another soul to notch on your belt. Real relationships, deep friendships, where you commit to loving them unconditionally and sacrificially, no matter what the outcome. Relationships marked in honesty, not manipulation, love not judgment.

The American church is in decline because we have kept it for ourselves. A church that constantly looks inward is doomed to fail. A bakery that keeps all its bread ends up with stale

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<sup>3</sup> Augustine (Sermon 46, 14-15: CCL 41, 541-542)

bread. William Temple, an Anglican archbishop put it this way, “The Church is the only society that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members.”<sup>4</sup>

If we are to turn the decline of the American church around we have to match our hearts with the heart of God, a heart that leaves 99 for 1.

I'll close with a beautiful conversion story I heard last week in the Watauga county jail. If you're like me you hear so few of these stories that you wonder if true conversions still exist in the American church. On Wednesday mornings a few individuals and I go into the county jail to lead a discussion on a passage of scripture with the men waiting for their court dates behind bars. Last week a young man who has been in the jail for almost a year told us the story of his conversion a few months ago. He had a particularly rough day in jail that day and had called his grandmother to hear her soothing voice. She heard him out and suggested that he pray. He had prayed before, but nothing ever happened, he never felt like god was ever there. But he went back to his cell and prayed like he had tried so many times before, but this time it actually felt like someone was listening. He told some of the other men later that night in their nightly bible study and they prayed with him and he invited Christ into his life. Now here comes my favorite part of the story. He described the feeling that followed as God holding a lighter under his heart. The inner John Wesley nerd in me jumped when he said this. As John Wesley famously described his own conversion experience as his heart being strangely warmed. This young man in the county jail took his seat at the table of Christ, and I know that there was great rejoicing in heaven that evening!

May we be a church that causes the heavens to be in constant celebration for the lost are being found. Amen

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<sup>4</sup> This quotation is widely attributed to William Temple (1881-1944), but I could not find a solid reference.