

What Matters to God?

Luke 15:1-11

I believe that all of us came here today hoping to hear a word from God. Didn't we? So I want to pray, and then I want to talk to you, from the Bible, about what God would say if you asked Him this question: What matters to You, God? What do You really care about? What's really important to You?

Let's pray. (prayer).

What's really important to God? Is that of interest to you? I hope so, because I believe that it's what God wants to talk to every one of us about that today. I don't believe it's a coincidence that you're in the room this morning/evening. I think God wants you to see your life in terms of these two categories.

So let's talk about what really matters to God.

If you study the Bible you'll discover that it says that ***God is on an all-out search for two kinds of people.*** Read it from cover to cover, and you'll find that it pictures God in search mode. But He's not like a casual shopper who strolls through the mall just to see what's there. He's intense and intent about finding and working with two kinds of people.

And all of us in this room can fit into one of these two categories.

There are actually about 4 kinds of people in this world, but God really only wants there to be two kinds. Have I peaked your curiosity yet about what those two kinds are?

My hope is that in the next half hour, you're going to be able to diagnose the category you're in right now and the category you want to be in.

So, let's get at it. The first category of people that God is searching for are what He calls, ***The Fully Committed.***

The Fully Committed. Let me explain this to you.

One time in the O.T. a well-intentioned king of Israel named Asa came under attack from the neighbor to his north. Asa was a seasoned king who had been at war several times before, and in those previous battles, Asa's strategy was to do the best he could to array his troops tactically, and then pray that God would fight for them.

And God always did. As a result, Asa never lost a battle.

One time Asa was attacked by a vastly superior force from Ethiopia. In customary fashion, he arrayed his troops, and then prayed. Let me read you the actual account from the Bible.

Once an Ethiopian named Zerah attacked Judah with an army of a million men and three hundred chariots. They advanced to the city of Mareshah, so Asa deployed his armies for battle in the valley north of Mareshah. – 2 Chronicles 14:9-10

Then Asa cried out to the Lord His God, “O Lord, no one but you can help the powerless against the mighty! Help us, O Lord our God, for we trust in you alone. It is in your name that we have come against this vast horde. O Lord, you are our God; do not let mere men prevail against you!” – 2 Chronicles 14:11

That’s what Asa prayed. Here’s what happened:

So the Lord defeated the Ethiopians in the presence of Asa and the army of Judah, and the enemy fled. – 2 Chronicles 14:12

That’s background for what I want to tell you now.

Several years later, King Asa is older and more established. So when this king from the north attacks him, Asa’s reluctant to go into battle, because now he’s got more to lose than he used to when he was just a young king starting out.

So this time, in his conservative days, instead of going to battle, he takes money from his treasury and pays the king of Syria to attack his rival from his eastern flank. That way, Asa risks nothing.

He lets somebody else do his fighting for him.

Well, God is watching closely, like He always does when His people are in need. He knows all about the hostile king of Asa’s northern border. And He is so disappointed when Asa takes the comfortable way out that He sends a prophet to Asa, whose name is Hanani.

Here’s what happened:

Hanani the seer came to King Asa and told him, “Because you have put your trust in the king of Syria instead of in the Lord your God, you missed your chance... - 2 Chronicles 16:7

Don’t you remember what happened to the Ethiopians... and their vast army? At that time you relied on the Lord, and he handed them all over to you? – 2 Chronicles 16:8

The eyes of the Lord search the whole earth in order to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him. What a fool you have been!” – 2 Chronicles 16:9

Do you see what happened there?

God knew the predicament Asa was in.

It was a chance for Asa to do good and express faith. To be fully committed and prove it.

I can almost hear God saying, “O Asa! I have been searching for someone who I could use. Someone who would do my bidding. Someone who would trust me and be committed to saving my people from their enemy. And Asa, you ducked! You chumped out. Asa, what a fool you have been!”

People of New Song, God is on an all-out search for two kinds of people in this world. The first kind is the kind He can use. Fully committed people. Is that you?

The second kind of people God is searching for is the kind of people Dora read about in Luke 15 a few minutes ago.

Luke 15 explains *why* God is searching for fully committed people.

Luke 15 is the story that forced me to leave the comfortable church I was in and become a church planter.

I told you last week that in November of 1989 I read Luke 14 and God spoke so strongly from that chapter that I prayed sort of a dumbfounded prayer that God would change me, even though I didn't know what He should change me to.

So after reading Luke 14, I prayed a “God, please change me,” prayer. But I didn't know what that change should look like.

And since I was reading Luke 14 at the time, I don't know why I didn't turn the page and look in Luke 15 for the answer. But I didn't. So God had to take me there in a very creative way.

A month after praying the “God change me” prayer, I was scheduled to be at a pastor's conference in Dallas, Texas.

The first night of that conference, a pastor from Chicago named Bill Hybels got up and explained Luke 15 to us all.

Luke 15 is the record of Jesus telling three stories or three parables. The stories of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the wayward son.

If you read Jesus' parables, you discover that normally, when He tells a parable, He tells the story and then He goes on to explain what it means before telling another parable. But in Luke 15, Jesus doesn't pause to explain. He just launches right into the next parable and then the next.

Why?

Well, to understand that, you need to remember the introduction that Dora read just a few minutes ago. This is so important, that I'd like you to get your Bibles out again and turn back to Luke 15.

(read vs. 1-3)

Then Jesus tells the stories of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Wayward Son. These stories are so rich and carefully woven that I don't have time to unpack them all the way for you this week, so come back next week. Because next week we'll learn all about the Prodigal Father in the last story, who lifted His robes and ran. It may be my favorite story in the entire Bible.

But follow me today and you will see some things that may just open your eyes about these two categories that God is searching for, and what matters to Him.

In our translation of the Bible, the story of the Lost Sheep begins this way. "Suppose one of you...?" Literally this should be translated "Which of you, being a shepherd...?"

Remember, Jesus is delivering this story to a group of devoutly religious leaders. Upper class Orthodox Jews. In their minds, in their day, being a shepherd was a lowly trade. Shepherds were lower-class citizens. – It's interesting that when Jesus was born, the angels told the news first to shepherds who were abiding in the fields by night, isn't it?

Jesus knows that these men think of shepherds and second-class citizens, so he chooses to tell a story about a shepherd, to get their attention. He makes up a story about a shepherd. He asks them a question about doing something they would never do. When he says, "Which of you, being a shepherd..." immediately all of them know the answer: "none of us would do whatever you're driving at, because none of us would ever become shepherds. If we had sheep, we'd hire someone to watch them for us."

Jesus gets their attention quickly. While they're all thinking about what a despicable trade sheep-herding is, He tells them about a shepherd who loves sheep.

The second shock comes to them when this shepherd is saddled with the responsibility of actually losing a sheep. – Look at v. 4. "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them?"

In Middle Eastern cultures, just like in the Spanish culture, because saving face is so important, if you were describing a sheep that had strayed, you would never say, "suppose the shepherd loses one of them..." To help him save face, you'd say, "suppose one of them wandered off."

It's like in Spanish. How many of you speak Spanish.

In Spanish, if I'm eating dinner and I accidentally bump my plate so that it falls on the floor and breaks, what do I say? "Se rompio." – It broke itself. A Spanish speaker never says, "I broke the plate, unless he is specifically wanting to indict himself and point the finger at his own idiocy.

In English we'd say, "I broke the plate." But in Spanish we'd say, "The plate broke itself." Same in most Middle Eastern languages.

You would not say, "I lost the sheep." You say, "The sheep got lost."

Jesus says, "the shepherd loses one of them."

So, this is a shepherd no Pharisee would want to imitate.

But this shepherd loves his sheep.

Now, I'm going to ask you a series of questions, and I need you to follow me, so keep your text open and concentrate for the next few minutes.

In Jesus' story, how many sheep does the shepherd have? 100. And what happens to them? One wanders off. One gets lost. He leaves the other 99 in the open country. He doesn't even bring them back to the city and corral them for the night. He leaves them in potential danger to go and find the one that's lost.

When he finds the sheep, what does he do? Puts it on his shoulders and brings it home.

And what does he say to his friends? "Rejoice with me." Why? Because he's happy. So happy, he throws a party to celebrate.

The story of a shepherd.

Who's the star of the second parable? A woman.

Who's Jesus talking to as he tells this parable? Men. Pharisaic men.

How did Pharisaic men feel about women? They thought they were third class citizens.

And what does the woman have that's of value to her? 10 coins.

How many sheep did the shepherd have? 100.

How many coins did the woman have? 10.

Jesus is reducing the proportions.

Coins were very rare in agrarian cultures. Much of their trade was carried on by barter. Any cash you had would be used only for emergencies, only to buy things you couldn't

get any other way. Some scholars think this woman's coins represent her dowry, her bride-price. Many tell us that a woman who had coins back then would probably make jewelry out of them, stringing them on a string to make a necklace. So when this woman lost her coin, it ruined her whole ensemble. It wasn't just that she was down one coin; she was also wearing jewelry that had one of its decorations missing. This panics the woman. She scours the house until she finds it.

What does she do when she finds it? She throws a party.

Why? Because she's happy.

Jesus then tells his third story. We didn't read it this week, but we will next week. It's the story of a father who has 2 sons. – Notice the progression: 100 sheep, 10 coins, 2 sons. He's lowering the proportions.

One of the two sons gets lost, but eventually turns up again. And when he does, his father runs to him – something no Middle Eastern landowner would do, because to run in his robe meant he would have to lift the robe, and lifting the robe meant he would expose his ankles, and exposing his ankles was undignified. He would be lose face in front of the whole village for doing such a thing. – A third time, we have a hero that no Pharisee would want to identify with.

When the son is found, the father throws the mother-of-all-parties to celebrate his return. Why? Because he's happy.

Those are the three stories. I wish we had time to go over them each in detail. But I will go over the third one in detail next week, and believe me, it will be one of the most exciting stories you've ever heard.

All I have time for right now, though, is to summarize and synthesize the stories so that you see why Jesus tells them. Four things to note:

(1) *In each of the stories, the plot line is: something is lost.* A sheep is lost, a coin is lost, a son has wandered away from home. If you've got your own copy of the Bible, you might find it helpful at some point to go through this chapter and underline the words "loss, loses, and lost," and see how many times that would be repeated in its various forms.

In addition,

(2) *In each of the stories, what is lost really matters to the hero of the story.* Isn't that true? The shepherd is so concerned about the loss of his one sheep, that he risks the other 99 to find him. The woman is so distraught over the loss of her one coin that she cancels all her plans and scours the entire house. The father is so brokenhearted that his son has wandered that he endures the scorn of the entire village by running to him when he finally heads for home. In each case, what is lost matters so much to the one who lost it that it warrants an all-out search.

Third observation:

(3) *When what was lost is found, the hero is so happy, he or she throws a party to express their joy.*

Fourth observation:

(4) *In each of the stories, the hero is someone who wouldn't really be admired by most religious leaders.* The first hero is a shepherd, a second-class citizen. The second is a woman, a third-class citizen. The third is a father. A potentially-admirable figure, until he does the unthinkable and lifts his robes in order to run and save his son from humiliation and shame. No Pharisee could admire a man like that.

Put those four things together, and what do you have?

You have Jesus standing in front of a group of longstanding religious types who think they have figured out what really matters to God. They've read 2 Chronicles 16:9, they would have memorized it by the time they were 10 years old. They see themselves as the fully-committed. So their honest and best thinking is that *they* (and only they) matter to God.

When they see Jesus talking with the outcasts of society, they're angered because they believe He, being a rabbi, is diminishing God's name and dignity by associating with such lowlife people.

Jesus is so angst-filled by their thinking that He tells them not one, not two, but three parables, back-to-back-to-back, as if to say, "Your perception of who matters to God and who doesn't is so far off that I am going to clear this concept up once and for all. I am going to rapid-fire truth into your souls so that you will never again wonder what matters to God."

Then He tells them about lost things that matter to people they don't admire.

What He's saying to them is: There are two kinds of people that God longs for and searches for.

1. *The fully committed.*

2. *Those who are lost.*

And the fully committed are not proud, self-conscious religious types who think that the most important thing is their religious life.

He's really saying two things in this parable: (1) lost people matter to God so much that He's on an all-out search to find them. And every time a lost person gets found, all of heaven rejoices with the hero of heaven, which is God. And (2) the fully committed are those who understand this and rejoice with God when what He has lost gets found. So much so that they join the all-out search as well.

Can you see why God says in 2 Chronicles, “My eyes are searching the earth to find every person who is fully committed to me”? It’s because God so loves those who have wandered from His Fatherhood that He is enlisting all of His other children who are willing to join the search.

Because only the fully committed reach out to the lost.

- Only the fully committed serve long hours at the church so it’s a place where the lost can get found.
- Only the fully committed pray diligently for their friends who will otherwise spend a Christless eternity.
- Only the fully committed alter their spending habits so they can render the full tithe and fund ministries that reach lost people.
- Only the committed stay up and stay up late, dreaming of ways to reach out to their lost friends and neighbors.
- Only the committed look out of eyes that see the way God does and think first about others and second about themselves.
- Only the committed.
- Only the committed.
- Only the fully committed.

The hard part about this story for me was that I thought I was fully committed. I wanted to be. I had invested three years of my life in seminary because I wanted to serve God fully. The problem was that I thought serving Him fully meant serving His already-saved sheep.

Two weeks after I heard this message by Hybels, I was in a grocery store check out line, waiting to pay for my groceries. You know how your mind has nothing to think about while you’re standing in line and you’ve already scanned the headlines of the National Enquirer and the other magazines they have there?

Well, my mind was vacant for a minute, so I started looking around. There were about 5 people in my line, and five in the line next to me, and five in each of the 10 lines or so that were around me. I started thinking about how many of those people had no clue what it meant that Christ had died for their sins. My rough estimate was that probably about 40 of those 50 people in those lines were lost and didn’t even know it.

And I thought, “But I know it! And I could help them. And who else will if I don’t? And how will I ever look God in the face on the day I go to heaven if I don’t help them? How could I ever hope to say to Him, ‘I followed you fully,’ if I didn’t pray for them and befriend them, and help a local church to reach them?”

I’m the type of guy who only cries at the end of sappy movies. But while looking around at those people the thought came to me, “I am so far off. I thought I was fully committed, and I thought only people like me mattered to God.” My eyes started leaking and my shoulders started shaking, and I honestly don’t know how I paid the cashier. But I vowed on that day that I would do everything in my power to invest the rest of my life in helping build a church where the fully committed reached out to the lost.

And that's why New Song exists today.

In New Song's pre-launch days, I would look around the room at the members of that start-up group, and I would think, "These people get it! They really get it. Sure, they have problems. There are struggles in this room. But none of them is here solely to get. They're all here because they want God to be pleased by their full commitment to Him. And they're here because they want Him to use this church to help the other category that He cares so much about: lost people."

And now, I want so much for all of you to have that same fire.

I hope, over the next four weeks, you'll make some decisions about what spiritual camp you want to be in, and what part you want to play for God. I hope all of you will make the decision to invest your life with God, because it's the only life you have. I hope in these next four weeks, you'll decide to build relationships with your neighbors and co-workers, and pray for them, and look for openings to invite them to church.

I hope you'll decide to help make your church a place where seekers are welcome, by getting to know others and by finding a place to make a difference, according to the gifts and talents God has given you. I hope you'll decide to manage your time in such a way that you can show up each week, and join a small group, which will help you grow even more.

I hope you'll decide to manage your money in such careful ways that you can move towards the full tithe, so that we can add more ministries that touch more lost people. And I hope you'll see God for the shepherd, woman, father, that He really is – a God who is on an-all out search for those who are outside of His family.

Will you do those things?

Believers, there are two categories of Christians in the world today. The casual, and the committed. Which category are you in, and which category do you want to be in?

Last week, after one of the services, one of our founding members came up to me and reminded me of the prayer that changed all of us in the original group that started the church. During the weeks leading up to our launch we all prayed, ***God, I don't ask you for much today. I just ask that you give me your heart for lost people.***

I'd ask all of you who are believers to pray that prayer every day between now and our anniversary, Sept. 29. Will you do that?

And seekers, there are really only two categories of the lost in the world today. The lost who are looking, and the lost who aren't interesting in looking. I hope you'll decide today that if you're not ready to come into relationship with God through His Son Jesus Christ, that you'll decide to go on a search for Him, like He's on a search for you.

So here's how I want to end. I want to give all of you a chance to register a decision or two in heaven this morning. I want to give you a chance to tell God what category you want to be in, and what you're willing to do to get there.

So would you bow your heads with me?

Father, as we begin this prayer, I know Your Spirit is present, and I believe You've been speaking to many, many of us.... Friends, how many of you want to say to God this morning, "I want to be a fully committed follower of yours today"? Would you raise your hand. - Pray for them.

And how many of you are willing to say, "I will commit myself to praying, 'God, I don't ask you for much today, I just ask that you'd give me your heart for lost people.' From now until our Anniversary?" – Pray for them.

And how many of you are willing to say, "I'm a seeker today. And I want to be found"? I want to accept God's invitation to be His son or daughter based on the price Christ paid for my sins?
Pray for them.

And maybe that step was too bold for you today, but you'd you're willing to say, "God, I will become a seeker who's searching" today? Pray for them.

And God, now hear my prayer. Make us a church of the fully committed, and a place where the lost can be found.

In Jesus name, Amen.