

FROM SECURING SELF TO SEEKING OTHERS

Shift Series (Part 2) | Text: Luke 15

Shifting Gears

We're talking this month about four crucial SHIFTS that Jesus calls us to make from the way many of us normally do life and the far more satisfying and significant way of living that Christ calls the "kingdom of God." I talked about the first shift last week – the move from dabbling to discipleship. That shift is like the move out of neutral into first gear for a race car driver. I am going nowhere fast until I make the decision to shift from a position of relative neutrality toward Jesus to a position of genuine commitment to him and his way of life. If I can catch a vision of the amazing life Jesus has and wants for me, and develop the intention to go after it, and start to exercise regularly the means that help me become such a person, remarkable things can happen. My relationship with God and others can improve. My character and influence on others can get profoundly better. I can gain a life that is abundant and eternal. But it all begins with that first SHIFT. I have to decide: Am I going to remain a mere dabbler, or am I going to be an authentic disciple? Have YOU made that shift?

If you have, then you're ready to take it up to Second Gear. And this second SHIFT is the focus of some of the most famous of Jesus' parables, all found in Luke chapter 15. Listen to the Word of God: **Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. 2 But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, "This man welcomes sinners and eats with them." 3 Then Jesus told them this parable:**

4 "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? 5 And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders 6 and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' 7 I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.

8 "Or suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one. Doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it? 9 And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.' 10 In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." Jesus then goes on and tells his most renowned story – the Parable of the Prodigal Son. I'll come back to that one in a moment.

Plumbing the Parables

What I hope you'll notice – as I touched on in a message five years ago -- is that all of the stories in this chapter have four elements in common. The opening story Jesus tells is about a man who owns a hundred sheep. The second is about a woman who had ten silver coins. The third tale is about a father who had two sons. And the common element is that, in each case, and through no apparent fault of the owner, one of these possessions has gone missing. A sheep wanders off, probably out of *stupidity*. A coin rolls away, perhaps the result of blind *gravity*. A son splits from his family, clearly out of selfish *depravity*. These three stories display the brainless choices, the blind circumstances, and poor character that define a lot of what happens to people in life.

The second common element in these stories is the response of those who would have been listening to Jesus. Christ doesn't supply this soundtrack but it's not hard to fill in. : The conventional response to each loss would likely have been: "Who cares?" "It serves that dumb sheep right if he becomes wolf-bait." To the woman they'd say: "Don't bother with the missing coin. It'll probably turn up at some point. Besides, you've still got nine more pieces of silver. You're rich." To the father they'd shout: "Let the kid starve! He's proven himself worthless by demanding his inheritance early. If he ever returns, have him stoned." Jewish law would have condoned that.

It is, however, the third element of each story on which the teaching of Jesus turns. You see, apparently the main character in each story actually cares a lot. While Jesus doesn't give us all this detail, we can imagine the shepherd leaving the other ninety-nine in "the open country," and venturing off into what was, implicitly, the more tangled countryside, searching through ravines and thickets until he locates the missing lamb. Lighting a lamp and grabbing a broom, the woman goes knees and cheek-down to the floor, fishing around under every object "**carefully**" until she finds her coin. Seeing his boy "**while he was still a long way off,**" the father forgets his dignity and past injury, hikes up his robe, and goes running out to meet his criminally-errant son.

And, finally (the fourth common element) in each story, a great party ensues. The shepherd "**calls his friends and neighbors and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.'**" The woman in the second story gathers all her associates and says, "**Rejoice with me; I have found my lost coin.**" The father in the last tale cries to his servants, "**Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.**" In each case, a celebration is held that seems utterly out of proportion to the apparent value of the item. Are you with me, so far?

Getting The Heart of God

Some of those listening to Jesus would certainly have said, "I don't get it. Why get so excited over the reclamation of a stupid sheep, an ordinary coin, a lousy son?" That Jesus anticipates this response is evident from the story he goes on from there to tell.

Jesus describes the reaction of the Elder Son to the news that his father is throwing a party for his wayward brother: **"All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!"** (Luke 15:29-30)

Frankly, God's grace *doesn't* make sense from the vantage point of Religion. It is why the Pharisees were appalled by the fact that Jesus welcomed and ate with people they considered undesirables. Religion says that it's the people who appear to do the "right" things that matter. It's the ones who stay in the fold, who remain in the purse, who don't stray from home that are the valuable ones. It's the people who already attend church, whose rule-keeping seems sterling, who don't upset the order, who ought to be God's focus. But this only reminds us that "lostness" can take more than one form.

The fact that the Elder Brother sees himself as "slaving" for the father instead of serving him displays that he doesn't have a loving relationship with his Dad. The fact that he resents not being given "even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends" shows that he doesn't value the privilege of dining with his father every day. The fact that he sees the wayward boy as "this son of yours" instead of as "this brother of mine" reveals that, in spite of all the time he's spent at the father's house, he still does not get what it means to be "family" as the Father has in mind.

As Tim Keller has observed, there at least two big forms of lostness. We can be lost in our selfishness (like the younger brother) or lost in our self-righteousness (like the older brother).¹ Both break the Father's heart. And both of these conditions have this in common: We are focused on securing ourselves. We may want place or position or food or comforts or recognition or validation or understanding for ourselves -- legitimate needs mostly -- but we have a difficult time seeing that so do others, and that they need our help to find those graces too. Don't get me wrong: It's OK to invest energy in trying to secure ourselves. We should. But if we are not every bit as energetically seeking the well-being of others, then we still don't get our heavenly Father's heart.

Think of about this: The eternal Son of God could easily and justifiably have secured himself in his heavenly resort. He could have happily remained in an eternal armchair, surrounded and served by spectacular, adoring angels. But, this is what gets me: He chose to go out and down into the darkness and briar-patches of this world to find a lost stinking sheep named Dan Meyer. He laid himself down on a Roman cross to pay for my sins and reclaim me, even though I was just one little coin that could hardly enrich God's vast treasury. Through Jesus Christ and his Church, God spread his arms wide to welcome me home when I was very lost, and being part of his family has changed my life for the good. What's your story?

Making the Shift

In her award-winning novel, *WHERE THE CROWDAD'S SING*, Delia Owens tells the story of Kya Clark, a child whose traumatized mother and siblings and violent alcoholic father abandon her, one-by-one, to live alone in the coastal marshlands of North Carolina. With little but the wild animals and birds as her companions, Kya develops remarkable survival skills and a stunning knowledge of the life of the marsh. Having suffered so much and lived for so long outside the bounds of what most people consider "normal," however, Kya IS a bit strange and the people of Barkley Cove (the closest town) come to suspect, reject, and even despise her. She is written off like one of those "sinners" the Pharisees and teachers of the law felt Jesus should bypass.

Near the climax of the story, Kya is put on trial for her life with the whole town arrayed against her, until a venerable old lawyer rises in his closing argument and pleads this case: *"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, I grew up in Barkley Cove, and when I was a younger man I heard the tall tales about the Marsh Girl... Many still call her that. Some people whispered that she was part wolf or the missing link between ape and man. That her eyes glowed in the dark. Yet in reality, she was only an abandoned child, a little girl surviving on her own in a swamp, hungry and cold, but we didn't help her. Not one of our churches or community groups offered her food or clothes. Instead we labeled and rejected her because we thought she was different. But, ladies and gentlemen, did we exclude Miss Clark because she was different, or was she different because we excluded her? If we had taken her in as one of our own—I think that is what she would be today..."*

As you read the story, you realize that it is not so much the heart of Kya but the heart of the community that is on trial and, by the end, (spoiler alert) the jury makes a SHIFT and Kya is set free. Kya Clark goes on to become a renowned and well-published naturalist, a celebrated artist, and the pride of Barkley Cove. She finds more love and hope and redemption than she had dared to dream.

I wonder how many more Dan's or Kya's or YOU's are out there -- sinners, strangers, maybe a bit odd or isolated people who need the grace of God's family and would come to be a tremendous blessing to that family were you and I to reach out and embrace them. We're never going to reach them until we've all made the SHIFT from caring primarily about securing self to seeking others' good much more of the time?

Here's a little quiz on how that shift is going for you. When you walk into the church building, school, your workplace or shopping mall, is your main thought: "I wonder what I'll get here?" Or have you shifted to thinking: "I wonder what I can give here, who I can welcome, guide, help or encourage here?" When you leave this building on the weekend, are you thinking: "Well, glad I got my tune up and fill up for another week." Or are you thinking: "Now, how can I use what I heard and learned here to better serve others? Whose life can I impact for good?" When God blesses you with a promotion or a financial windfall or greater prominence in some sphere, do you think:

“Wow, this is great for me!” Or is your thought: “Wow, thank you Lord; now I can help or touch in your Name even more people.”

If you want to groove the SHIFT I’m talking about even more fully this week ahead, here’s a concrete idea: Identify someone in your path ahead who bears some resemblance to the lost sheep, coin, or kids we meet in Christ’s parables and do something to build a redemptive relationship with them. Maybe it’s someone who looks like they don’t know where they’re going that you’ll meet here today. Perhaps it’s a person of a different race, generation, or political persuasion. It could be a stranger, a server or check-out person, a person who speaks with a different accent. The point is, welcome what some people might call a “Marsh girl,” a “sinner,” or “stranger” and eat with them. If you can’t arrange a meal, then pray for them, listen to them, learn about them, learn from them, express practical compassion toward them.

The Bible makes clear that this is exactly the kind of thing Jesus did, and oddly, people who call themselves Christians often do not. If we’re disciples not dabblers, then having looked afresh into the face of Jesus today, it’s going to be easier to make this SHIFT.

Let’s pray together...

Lord God, like those people in Barkley Cove, one day we are going to wake up and realize what a shame it was that we spent so much time securing ourselves and so little time reaching out in love to the people around us – people who hunger for security, belonging, and love – just as we do. By the light of your shining glory, we’re going to realize how many people could have been our beloved family members, had we dared to open our hearts and extend our hand to them. Knowing that, help us to make that shift NOW. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

¹ Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* (New York NY: Penguin Books, 2008).