

Loved and Lost **Luke 15: 1-7**

Rev. Philip Parker
August 11, 2024

Driving to work one day, Hal David thought of some words for a new song. Arriving in downtown New York City, he shared the words of his new song with Burt Bacharach, his partner. They were a team. Burt wrote the music and Hal created the lyrics. This is what Hal had written, "What the world needs now is love sweet love. It's the only thing that there's just too little of." Sharing the words of this song with Burt, they both realized that it was a great chorus for a new song. But what about the verses, the message of the song? Nothing came to mind for over two years, and then one day once again driving in to work, Hal realized that his song was really a prayer, a prayer to God, asking the Lord for something that even surpassed all of the natural wonders of the world in which we live. Very quickly the words and the melody came together and the song was released for the very first time in 1965. Since then it has become a classic within the realm of modern day pop music. Listen once again to this memorable song. SING THE SONG.

Yes, what the world needs now is love sweet love. With growing conflict and violence all around the world, love is in desperately short supply. Now more than ever we need love. We need to love one another and we need to be loved, but most importantly we need a love that comes from on high. We need God's love. Nowhere in the Bible is that expressed more clearly and more beautifully than in John 3:16. Repeat it with me. "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on Him should not die but have everlasting life." It's just one short verse, but in that one verse there is so much that we need to hear, to understand and to share with others. Let's take a closer look at it this morning.

It begins with this marvelous declaration, "God so loved the world." The word God, of course, refers to the Creator of the universe and to the One who has revealed Himself throughout the pages of the Bible. The word "love" can have a variety of meanings from romance to brotherly affection. Here, however, it has an entirely different meaning. It refers to the kind of love that is intentional, the kind of love that loves the unlovable. It's the kind of love that says, "I care about you and will do whatever it takes to show you that my love for you is real and genuine. The next word is "world." It doesn't refer to the realm of nature. It refers to the realm of humanity, people like you and me.

That brings us to the declaration of what God has done to show us His love. The verse continues, "For God so loved the world of people that He sent His only begotten Son." That phrase "only begotten" can best be described as "the one and only, the special one, unlike any other." In other words, Jesus

was unique. He carried within Himself the DNA of His heavenly Father. In the Gospel of John chapter 14, verse 9, Jesus says, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." Just imagine for a moment a human father sending his one and only son, a perfect reflection of who he is, into a world like ours, a world filled with so much hatred and violence. The Bible clearly teaches us that is exactly what God did, knowing full well the consequences of such a bold step. God the Father was willing to send His Son into our world and subject Him to the horror and shame of death on a cross. Why? Because He loves us.

Isn't that wonderful? God so loves the world of people, people like you and me, that He sent His only begotten Son, that whosoever places their trust in Him, whoever places their life into His care, will not perish but have everlasting life.

There's just one problem. We are lost and separated from God because of our sins. Paul expressed it this way, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). What did he mean when he wrote this verse of Scripture? He meant that sin is something that builds a wall of separation between us and God and eventually between us and one another. Adam and Eve, the first human beings, were forced to leave the Garden of Eden because of their sin and that sinful nature was passed along to their children. Cain took the life of his brother Abel. It's been a part of the human experience ever since, a willful determination to rebel against God and His standards, regardless of how that affects our relationship with Him and with one another. Additionally, notice that Paul uses the word "all" when referring to sin. It's a part of all of our lives, no matter how hard we try to avoid it. For example, is there anyone who can truthfully say that they have never violated a traffic law, like speeding or running a stop light. We're all guilty and the same is true with regards to our relationship with God. Psalm 51, verses three and four declare, "For I know my transgressions and my sin is always before me. Against You, only You have I sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You are proved right when You speak and justified when You judge." If we're honest with ourselves, we know that we're all sinners and our sins are a good deal more serious than traffic violations. We have all said and done things that hurt others and deeply disturb our heavenly Father.

Here's something else that we need to know about this verse in the book of Romans. When we sin, we fall short of the glory of God. We do not measure up to His standards. Consequently, He has the right to hold us accountable, like a judge in a courtroom. That's what the writer of Psalm 51 was getting at when he said that God's judgements against us are justified. But why you might ask should God hold us accountable when we sin, when we don't quite measure up to the way He wants us to live? What does it matter if we fall a little short of God's glory? Well, the word "glory" describes a level of expertise without flaw or fault. In other words, "perfection." Speaking to the multitudes during the Sermon on the Mount,

Jesus said, "Be ye perfect, even as Your Father in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). But why is perfection so important? Aren't a few little missteps okay? No, they are not and here's why. Our lives, our relationship with God and our relationships with one another are like the launch of a space craft into outer space. Would the director of Mission Control at NASA be willing to hire an engineer who makes frequent mistakes in his space flight astronomical calculations? Would he employ someone who doesn't care what happens as a deep space mission blasts off? Of course not. The same is true of the Director of Mission Control for the entire universe. Like the NASA engineers and technicians who rescued Apollo 13, He requires a team that will not fail Him as He strives to save not just three astronauts, but all of humanity from an otherwise sure destruction.

If you will remember, the title of this sermon is "Loved and Lost." It embraces both God's love and our lostness. Nowhere in the Bible is this more beautifully portrayed than in the passage of Scripture that was read this morning, Luke 15:1-7. You know the story well. The shepherd walks out to the sheep pen early in the morning and counts his sheep. After counting to ninety and nine, he realizes that one is missing. What is he to do? Be thankful that he still has nearly a hundred, or spend the time and effort and even face the danger of going after that one lost lamb that has wandered off. He decides to leave the ninety and nine in the safety of the pen and go looking for that lost sheep which has wandered away. Like the lost sheep in this parable, it's all too easy for us as human beings to become lost. We wander away from God. We stop listening to His voice or following His instructions. We become lost in our sinful actions and attitudes. Our self-gratification becomes like that lamb's pursuit of greener pastures until we cross over the next hillside and find ourselves both lost and alone, cut off from not only our shepherd, but from the rest of the flock as well. But thank goodness, there is a shepherd who came looking for us, sent by God, a shepherd who truly loves us and who is willing and able to save us from our sins. That shepherd has a name and his name is Jesus. Yes, what the world needs now is love sweet love and fortunately that love has been graciously bestowed upon us, even when we were lost.