

**Ways in which God reaches out to us.**  
**Sermon by Pastor Diana J. Perkins**  
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There are many ways in which God speaks to mankind. King David said, "The heavens declare the glory of God." (Psalms 19) In the Old Testament, God spoke to his people through prophets, judges, and even by fire, light, thunders, and other manifestations of nature. A donkey was used to speak to a rebellious prophet. (Numbers 22:28)

When Jesus came to earth, He taught principles by using word pictures. These were called parables. It is a unique way of explaining a concept or truth that is understood only by those with a soft heart. Parables emphasis is on attitudes, concepts and characteristics rather than technicalities. Jesus used pictures of objects that all who were in hearing range could understand. Those with hardened hearts were not able to grasp the meaning of his stories because they focused on the substance of the story rather than the less obvious meaning that He was trying to convey to them. By using parables, the stories are timeless and we can grasp the concepts of grace, gentleness, concern, pride and much more when we approach the Scriptures with an open mind and heart.

Let's look at Luke chapter 15. The very first verse gives us a picture of the type of people who had gathered to hear the teachings of Jesus Christ. Among this group were publicans, sinners, Pharisees and scribes. The publicans were hated because they were tax collectors who charged people more than what was due in order to gain personal wealth. Sinners were looked down upon because they didn't follow the laws that the Pharisees and scribes laid out for the Jewish society. These people placed themselves above others and were critical of those who didn't adhere to their way of life or obey their rules.

In verse 2, we read the accusation that they railed against Jesus. " He welcomes sinners and he eats with them." This is not something that just took place in the Bible times. It happens today as well. There are circles of people that only welcome those who think, act and dress a certain way within their groups. Even in prisons and in jails, people judge others and will associate with those who they categorize as the lesser evil. The Jews code of conduct was determined by the honor/shame system. If your actions were commendable, you were honored and were able to hold your head up high and feel quite good about yourself. If you went against their rules, then you were shamed and you were put in a class of rejects. Jesus went against their code of conduct in this story for he welcomed publicans and sinners and even fellowshiped with them by sitting with them and sharing a meal with them. We can learn a lot about the mercy, grace and love of God that draws men to him. He states that he didn't come to call the righteous; he came to call sinners to repentance. Luke 5:32. Jesus said that those who are well don't have need of a physician. See Mark 2:17. In John 3:17, it says that Jesus didn't come to condemn the world. John 3:16 tells us that God loved this world so much that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believeth on him will not perish but have everlasting life.

God loves the sinner and he does whatever it takes to reach them with his love, mercy and grace. Read the story of Jonah and you will understand to what length God goes to redirect sinful people to live a righteous life.

In the parables that Jesus spoke following the accusation from the religious sects, Jesus told three stories. Each one of them emphasizes a certain characteristic of God and his love for mankind. Each story has value placed on it and each is more valuable than the story before it. Jesus invites all who are listening to place themselves in the shoes of his characters that he is speaking about. He starts with "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep." He was drawing his listeners into a real life experience, one they could identify with. Each person in his audience would no doubt put themselves in the category in which they felt they fit. He asked the people, "Who among you, having 100 sheep, when counting them at the end of the day as they enter the sheepfold, find that you are missing one, would not go and search for that lost sheep until you find it? You would not leave the sheep in the wilderness at the mercy of the elements or wild beasts, but you would leave the 99 that are safe and search for the one that strayed. When the shepherd found the sheep, he placed it upon his shoulders and rejoiced because he found his sheep. It doesn't stop there. When he gets home, he calls his friends and neighbors together and invites them to rejoice with him for he found the sheep that was lost. In verse 7, Jesus explained to the people that heaven rejoices with joy over one sinner that repents more than the 99 just persons which needs no repentance. He was reminding the Scribes and Pharisees that we all need to examine ourselves for none of us are righteous; we all are sinners needing the great physician's touch in our lives. Pride is a sin that keeps people from accepting the truth of the gospel and it hardens a heart so they will not accept the help that God offers.

See Romans 3:23. Jesus was tearing down the misconception of those self-righteous men with an understanding of God's love towards sinners. He carried the sheep; he rejoiced over finding him alive; he called in friends and neighbors to celebrate with him. He was not ashamed of the lost sheep because it had strayed; he focused on the blessing of finding it and bringing it safely home and placing it in the sheepfold with all the others. The shame/honor is involved in this story. It would be shameful to leave a sheep out in the wilderness to be at the mercy of the elements or wild beasts. Disregarding the man's personal inconvenience, he willingly goes out into the darkness to search and find the one that was lost. The religious group among them felt they were the beloved of God and the publicans and sinners were castaways. Not so! God searches, pleads and redeems those who have strayed.

The next story is a progression in value. First the lost sheep, then the story of the woman who lost her coin follows. The lost coin refers to a piece of jewelry that had ten silver coins on it worn by brides. This was equivalent to wedding rings that are treasures in our day. On the shame/honor system to lose a part of your wedding jewelry would be a shameful thing. To lose it in her house was something that compelled her to search diligently until she found it. She lit a candle, swept the house and finally found the coin in the dust that she swept up. She too called her friends and neighbors together to celebrate with her for the piece that she had lost was now found because of the value that she placed on it and the diligence in

which she searched for it. Again Jesus said, "There is joy in the presence of angels of God over one sinner that repents.

The next story has the most value of all in the Jewish culture, that of a son. This would be the most shameful of all, losing a son. These stories were relevant to everyone in the group that was listening to Jesus. Men and boys would relate to the story of sheep, the women would connect with the woman who lost part of her wedding jewelry and everyone would understand the father's grief over losing a son. As a mother, I ask myself what I did wrong that caused my children to go astray. It is painful to watch a rebellious child reap the harvest of their choices. The first time that I visited Maine State Prison as a volunteer pastor, I had to be guided into the routine of signing in, leaving coats and purses in a locker, and going through a metal detector. It was outside my comfort zone and I was a bit nervous. I sat over to one side of the room by myself and waited to be called to be escorted to the chapel. A lady was watching me without me realizing it and she came and sat next to me. This is what she said, "I believe this is the first time you have been here. I am sorry that your son is here and so is mine. However, dear, it will get easier the more times you come; my heart goes out to you." With that she stood up and moved to her former seat. I didn't have the heart to tell her that I wasn't there to see my son, but all the men there were sons and their mothers thoughts were with them. My heart went out to her for her kindness to a stranger that she thought was hurting.

This last story is about a wealthy father who has two sons. The elder is a hardworking man who is faithful and brings honor to his father. The younger son is lazy and rebellious. The prodigal son had no respect or appreciation for the hard work that his father had invested in giving he and his brother a safe place to live, a career to earn a living, and an inheritance that would be theirs after his death. The younger son asked for his share of the inheritance so he could go out into the world and seek his fortune. The father had no obligation to share his inheritance while he was still living, but he divided his wealth between his two sons. Shortly after this, the younger son took all that he had been given and left the homestead. He journeyed to a far country away from his father's watchful eyes. There he wasted all of his substance with riotous living. When his money was all gone, there arose a famine in that land and he began to be in want for the first time in his life. The only job that he could get was one of feeding pigs. Nobody gave him anything to help him or nourish him, so he ended up eating the husks that the pigs ate. When he came to himself, he said, "My father has many servants and they have enough bread to eat and some to spare and here I am starving to death. I will get up and go to my father and I will say to him, 'Father I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me one of your servants.'"

He arose and came to his father. But when he was a long ways off, his father saw him and had compassion on him. He ran and fell on the lad's neck and kissed him. The boy told his dad that he had sinned against heaven and against him and wasn't worthy to be called a son any more. But the father turned to the servants and commanded them to bring forth the best robe and put it on the boy. Put a ring on his hand and shoes on his feet. Also bring forth the fatted calf and kill it and let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and now he is found.

**There was rejoicing and the party began. The elder son heard the music and saw the group gathered at his father's house and he came to see what the celebration was all about. He called a servant and asked what all of this meant. The servant told him that his brother had returned and his father had killed a calf because he had come home safe and sound. The words made the brother angry and he refused to join the party. His father came out to seek him and asked him to come join in the celebration. He answered his father, "These many years I have served you and have never sinned against you. I have always done what you asked of me. Yet you never have given me a party so I could have a celebration with my friends. But as soon as your son comes home after wasting your living on harlots you have killed a fatted calf for him. The father explained that everything that he had belonged to his faithful son and he had always been with him. It was not unfair to make merry and be glad for his son was dead and now was alive; he was lost and now he is found.**

**Every one of us can relate to these stories and my desire is that you will understand the great love and mercy that God has towards all of us. None of us have anything to boast about for his grace has been extended to every one of us. He calls on us to have compassion on those who have gone astray and have wasted their lives on things that have no eternal value. I urge you to come to yourself just as the prodigal did and recognize that in God's family our needs are supplied. Philippians 4:19 says, "But my God shall supply all your needs according to his riches in glory." If you have not received Christ as your Lord and Savior, he is waiting and watching for your return. Won't you ask him into your heart today?"**