



Sermon Title: Marked By Jesus' Love

Luke 15

Speaker: Dr. Scott Dudley

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So good to see all of you guys here. Thank you for joining us. Those of you in the room, those of you online, thank you for being here for Kickoff Sunday. It's one of my favorite Sundays of the year, and I hope afterwards to see you upstairs with all the food and stuff. Yeah. Oh yes, the food and stuff. Hamburgers, hot dogs, corn on the cob, that sort of thing. I think you would all agree with me with the statement that the most important characteristic of a follower of Jesus is not outrage, it's love. Right? The most important characteristic of a follower of Jesus is not outrage or how many Christian-y things you put on social media. It's love. I mean Jesus, after all, said by this, everyone will know that you are my disciples if you love one another. And that word disciple just means someone who is becoming like Jesus.

And here at Bell Press, we talk about seven characteristics of a disciple, and they're on the screen there and they're in no particular order except for the very first one. All the other characteristics are meant to flow from being marked by Jesus love, by Jesus kind of love. Because Jesus, I think sometimes in our culture, we think love is a weak emotion, but Jesus love is strong and it is protective. And Jesus love makes us courageous. It makes us more hopeful. It makes us more joyful. It changes us. It leaves a mark to make us braver, more loving people. But we can't give what we don't have. So for the next couple of weeks, we're going to talk about how we've experienced Jesus love in a way that changes us, in a way that marks us, in a way that makes us braver, more loving people.

The entire Bible is about how much God loves us, not just as an abstract group, but as individuals, which is one reason we were encouraging you on your way in to have a name tag, somewhat ineffectively it seems like we encouraged you, or at least you were reluctant to do such a thing. But the reason is to remind us that to God, you're not just a number. He knows you by name and he pursues you because he is a pursuing God.

I've shared with you before that when Christina and I, my wife and I, were dating, she decided we should get married long before I thought we should get married. She decided long before I decided, and she was determined, man. So every day when I went, every single day, when I went to her apartment to see her, she opened the door and the first thing she'd say is, "Is today the day you're going to ask me to marry you?" Every single day, it was annoying, but I felt pursued. I felt loved, I felt wanted. If she wanted me, what can I say? And it feels good to be pursued by someone that you think is pretty cool, right?

God pursues you. And when we experience that love, it leaves a mark. It shows up in our behavior. And Jesus tells three stories about this, about God's love in Luke chapter 15. And it says, now, the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus, but the Pharisees, okay in the Bible, that phrase is never followed by anything good. As I've said before, it's like the theme music in the movie Jaws, but the Pharisees, dun, dun, dun, dun, dun, dun, dun, dun, dun. And teachers of the law muttered, this man welcomes sinners and he eats with them. So in that culture, to eat with someone was a sign of acceptance, and it scandalizes the religious-y people that Jesus would accept, quote sinners.

So Jesus told them this parable, suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn't he leave the 99 in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? And when he finds it, he joyfully, not grudgingly, not out of duty, joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and his neighbors together and he says, rejoice with me. I've found my lost sheep. And basically he has a party. I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who do not need to repent. And that word repent is important because Jesus loves and welcomes , quote, sinners no matter what we've done, no matter what we haven't done, he loves and he welcomes us and loves us so much, doesn't leave us where he found us, but calls us to repentance so that we can begin to live his better way of life that leads to more courage, hope, and joy.

Then Jesus goes on and he tells a second story. Suppose a woman has 10 silver coins and loses one, doesn't she light a lamp, sweep the house and search carefully until she finds it. And when she finds it, she calls her friends and neighbors together and says, rejoice with me. I've found my lost coin. So she throws a party too, just like the shepherd. In the same way I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. And then there's a third story in this chapter, which I'll get to in a minute. And these parables show us a couple of things about how Jesus loves us. And the first is this, his love is relentless. The first parable compares us to sheep. And what you need to know about sheep is sheep are the dumbest animals on the planet.

My grandparents raised sheep. I am not kidding you. I know what I'm talking about. They'll wander off to dangerous places and get eaten by wolves and all kinds of stuff. Sheep are just so stupid. So it is a little bit insulting that the Bible compares us to sheep a

lot over and over. Things like oh, we, like sheep, have gone astray and wandered off to our own way, right? That's true, isn't it? We are forever wandering away from God, pursuing other things, school, career, popularity, money, entertainment, romantic relationships, all are good things, all are good things, but we wander toward them so much we forget about God. But Jesus never gives up. Like the widow who keeps searching for the coin, like the shepherd who keeps looking for the one lost sheep, he never gives up. You are wanted. You are sought after. You are pursued by the God of the universe who made you.

Second, Jesus love makes no sense, at least from our point of view. It makes no sense to leave 99 sheep. That's 99% to put 99% of your wealth at risk to be eaten or lost, to put 99% of your wealth at risk just to go find the one sheep. It's not cost-effective. It doesn't pencil. It makes no sense. But the shepherd doesn't say, oh, it's just one sheep. I've got 99 more. In the same way when you wander away from God, God doesn't go, oh, it's just one person. I've got 8 billion more where that came from. No. No. He pursues and pursues you because he irrationally loves you. Jesus love is relentless. It makes no sense.

And then third, Jesus love is undignified. Back then, everyone would assume that God would welcome a sinner who was repentant. Everyone assumed that. But the idea that God would chase after people who keep running away from him, that would've appeared then, and even now, undignified. I mean it turns God into a simp, which is a word my kids use, which means someone who pursues someone, makes a fool of themselves pursuing someone who has no interest in them. It's undignified. Yet that's what God does.

The text says when even just one person turns toward him, God is so overjoyed that he throws a giant party in heaven, which is an interesting image, right? This party in heaven, God, a bunch of people are there, some charcuterie plates around, disco ball. Jesus is out on the dance floor. Woo-hoo, one sinner toward me. The idea of a God who gets giddy when just one person turns toward him is unlike any other God in any other religion. You just won't find this anywhere. That's how valuable you are to him. So valuable, he was willing to come himself in the person of Jesus and be born as a baby who had to have his diapers changed. That's undignified. And then be crucified to pay the price for our sins so we could be forgiven and reconciled to God. And back then people were crucified naked for the whole world to see. Very undignified. And he did it because he would rather die than lose you, so he did.

All of which leads to the third story in this chapter, in Luke chapter 15, a familiar story for a lot of us about a man who had two sons and the younger one said to his father, give me my inheritance now, which in that culture was the exact same thing as saying, old man, I wish you were dead so I could have your money. Very disrespectful. And then the younger son went to a far country where the text says he squandered the money away in

loose living. We don't know what that means. But when the money ran out and he was hungry, he remembered his father's generosity and he went back to his father. And the text says, but while he was still a long way off, his father saw him, which implies that every day the father must have been scanning the horizon, just hoping to get a glimpse of his son because the father's love is relentless and he never gives up.

And then it says, and he ran to his son. In those days, men did not run because to do so, they'd have to hike up their robes to run. And in that culture, it looked silly, it looked undignified. So men didn't run. But just like God, this man loved his son so much, he was willing to look undignified and run to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. And then the text says, just like the widow, just like the shepherd, the father is so overjoyed that he gives this big party to welcome his son home.

This is not the story people in Jesus culture would've expected to hear at all, at all. Because the younger son had basically said to his dad, I wish you were dead. Very disrespectful. And in an honor, justice culture such as Jesus culture was where fathers were held in a very high esteem. The story in that culture everyone would have expected to hear is when the son returned, the father would've picked up a stick and beaten his son to punish him for his disrespect. In that culture, the only way the father could regain his dignity would be to beat his son.

But instead, this father sacrifices his dignity and throws a party. In Jesus culture, this story is not the warm fuzzy story it is in ours. No, no. In Jesus culture, this story is offensive. It is offensive. And nobody knows that better than the older brother in the story. The one who didn't run away, who stayed home, who obeyed all the rules. And when the father throws the party to celebrate the younger son's return, older brother doesn't go into the party, he stays outside the house and pouts. And he's got a point, right? I mean, he's obeyed all the rules. He stayed home, but the younger son gets the party. It just seems so unfair. But again, in this culture, his refusal to join the party would've publicly humiliated the father. And again, in that culture, the father would be expected to beat his son, the older son, to punish him for his disrespect because he disrespected the father just like the younger son did.

But see how deep the father's love. Just as he ran to the younger son, he runs to the older one too. And the older son says, I've stayed here. I've obeyed all the rules, and you never gave me a party, but this guy returns and you give him the party. What's up with that?

And then the father says, my son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. And in the original Greek that this was written in, the word for son is a much more tender word than son. It means my boy, my boy. I don't love your younger brother more than you. I love you both. And everything I have is for both of you. But we had to

celebrate because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again. He was lost and now he's found. And thank you for your obedience. That's a good thing. But you're not in my house because you try so hard to be holy. You're in my house because I'm your father and I love you, period. And you're right. My love is relentless and it makes no sense from the world's point of view. And it's undignified. And I know that you think, it seems to you that I have wasted my love on sinners like your younger brother. But please, please, please won't you let me waste my love on you too.

What does God like? What does God really like? This chapter gives us a diversity of images. He's a shepherd, a widow, a good father in his relentless pursuit of you. So then, how do we experience this love in a way that changes us? Not just as an intellectual idea, but how do we experience it? Well, we're going to talk about that over the next couple of weeks. But for this week, three action steps, okay? You may want to take out a phone so you can take a picture of the screen when they're all up there. First action step, there's a sticker, okay? This summer we gave you a sticker chart and you really liked the sticker chart. In fact, we get more positive feedback on the stickers than on the sermons. So from now on, this is the last sermon I'll ever preach. We're just going to give you stickers.

There's a sticker. It's at the welcome desk. And pick it up and put it somewhere where you're going to see it every day, and it's going to remind you of Jesus love for you. Put it on your bathroom mirror, your car windshield, somewhere you're going to see it every single day to be reminded every day that Jesus loves you. And then later in this sermon series, we'll do something else with that sticker. But for now, just pick it up at the welcome desk.

Second, if you are able, attend worship in person this fall. Online is great for when you can't be here. So when you can't be here, please keep joining us online because worship is one of the primary places that we experience God's love, but worship is more powerful in community because it's more powerful when we can see other people in the room, know that we're not alone, and the Holy Spirit moves differently when we're together and where we can be more focused rather than distracted at home multitasking with a service going on in the background.

So when you can't be here, join in person, but make it a priority this fall to worship in person because it's just better in person. It's just better in person. I mean, come on, try it for three weeks and tell me I'm wrong. I dare you. I double dog dare you. Make it a priority to worship in person, to experience Jesus love more powerfully. And then third action step, let Jesus catch you.

After college, I lived with a family in the church that I was a part of, and they had this dog that if you opened the front door just to crack, the dog would push its way out and

start running down the street. And then if you chased the dog, the dog would stop for just a second, and then when you got really close, the dog would start to run away again, just to irritate you all the more. So getting the dog was actually a two-person job. One person had to chase the dog all the way around the block until it came back toward the house from the other direction, and then a second person had to stand there and catch the dog as the dog went by.

That's us with Jesus. We run away to pursue other things. We have to stop running long enough for him to catch us. So this week, set aside time every day and ask this question in prayer. Jesus, tell me, how much do you love me? And you can take a picture now of the screen. Ask that question in prayer and then listen for what pops into your head. It could be a word or a sentence, a memory, a song lyric, a scripture, verse, a picture, a feeling. It may not happen right away, maybe later in the day, maybe later that week. Don't evaluate it when it happens. Do that, but do it later, not in the moment because that kills the moment. At least several times this week, stop running, create space for Jesus to tell you how much he loves you.

When I think of someone who is marked by Jesus love, really clearly, I think of the senior pastor I worked for in California. His name was Walt, and he didn't usually fit the mold of a senior pastor, which was one of the things I really liked about him. For instance, when he was under a lot of stress, he would sometimes say, oh, I'm just so stressed out. It just makes me want to go to Catalina and drink. Catalina Island was his favorite place to go. It's off the coast of California and when he gets stressed, he's so, it just makes me want to go to Catalina Island and drink. But which was an odd thing for him to say, because he actually wasn't much of a drinker. He just didn't drink that much. It was just this thing that he would say when he was stressed out.

One time, we were in line at a coffee shop about a week before Christmas, and Walt started to say, oh, Christmas Eve stresses me out. There's high expectations for the sermon. It's just so stressful. It makes me want to go to Catalina and drink. And then the woman in front of us in line turned around and said, stop it. I go to your church and you're scaring me.

But one time his daughter said to me, my dad talks big game about wanting to go to Catalina to drink. Don't let him fool you. As soon as the boat docks, we all go to the house, but he walks out to the end of the pier and he just stays there for hours just talking to Jesus. He didn't go to Catalina to drink. He went to Catalina to be with Jesus, but not just there. Not just there. He would start every day with an hour long walk where he just would talk to Jesus and listen and experience Jesus love. And because he spent so much time with Jesus, Jesus love, he was marked by Jesus love. It just came out of him in conversations, in sermons, even when he preached a challenging sermon.

There were times before I was a pastor, Christine and I were just going to that church. We'd walk out of church and I'd say, I know he was kicking us in the backside in that sermon, but somehow I feel hugged. He just could do that because he was marked by Jesus love. And when the college pastor of that church left, the church asked me if I would be the college pastor. And I said, no, I'm going to be a professor. And then a few weeks later, they asked me again and I said, okay, I will do it for one year as an interim while you find someone else who is not me to be the college pastor. One year. That's it. Ready, go. Start looking. And I was never supposed to preach, which was fine. I didn't want to preach. But then one week, the pastor who was supposed to preach ended up having to pull out at the last minute. Nobody else wanted his spot.

So someone in some meeting somewhere said, well, how about Scott Dudley? So they asked me and I said, sure. It was August when a lot of people don't go to church in August, except of course for here, but in other churches, other people don't go to church in August. So I think they figured, well, he can't do too much damage in August. And that church had five services. And after the first service, Walt pulled me aside and he put his hand on my shoulder and he said, I see God's hand on you. You're anointed. There are a few things that will make that sermon better. And he gave me the few things that would make it better. And then he put his hand on my shoulder again, and he said, I see God's hands all over you. And he walked away. And I thought, I'll follow him anywhere. I'll follow him anywhere.

In those 90 seconds, Walt changed my life. It wasn't what he said. It was how he said it. I felt so loved. I felt so believed in. I felt so empowered. There's a word for what happened to me. I was Walt-ed. He changed thousands of people's lives, not because he was a great leader or preacher, though he was those things. He changed thousands of lives because he was so marked by Jesus love. And I wasn't exactly lost in that moment, like the prodigal son, but I also was not on God's path for me, which was to be a pastor, not a professor.

But the love of Jesus came through Walt so powerfully, it knocked me off course and changed the entire direction of my life. I ended up staying there four years, not one, until I retired. And then I came here.

The love of Jesus coming through him, knocked my life completely off course because the love of Jesus is pretty strong stuff.

Hallelujah.

And I know the reason Walt was so loving because he would say it or it's because he spent so much time letting Jesus catch him and experiencing Jesus love for him so much, it just poured out of him and changed thousands of lives. So this week, stop running. Let Jesus catch you. Ask him, tell me how much you love me Jesus? Because you are his

treasure, the precious coin. He will not stop pursuing. He will leave the 99, all of his wealth just to get to you. His love for you is relentless, unending, unceasing. No matter how fast or how far you run, no matter what you've done or what you haven't done, he will not stop. He will not rest. He will not give up.

He will not give in. You cannot stop God from pursuing you. His goodness and mercy will follow you all the days of your life. So you might as well just get used to it because there's not a darn thing you can do about it. Jesus loves you. This I know for the Bible tells me so. Hallelujah. Hallelujah.

Jesus there is no God like you. And there is no love like your strong, protective, empowering love. And we want to be loving people, but we can't give what we don't have. So, Lord, this week and as we go through this sermon series, it's a supernatural thing, Jesus, help us to feel your love in a way that leaves a mark, in a way that makes us more courageous and more loving at the same time. We can't do it on our own, Jesus, you have to do it for us. So Lord, here we are. Help us experience your love. In your name Jesus. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Opening Question: Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- Who is Jesus' audience for these three stories, and how is each story meant to relate to that audience?
- What characteristics describe the shepherd, the woman, and the father? What characteristics describe the sheep, the coin, the younger son, the older son?
- Which of the shepherd's, woman's, and father's qualities do you most need? Why?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.