

THE PARABLE OF THE LOST SHEEP: THE SUPREME EXAMPLE OF CARING

MATHEW 18:11–14

Introduction

This is one of the most famous parables shared by Jesus — the parable of “The Lost Sheep” or the parable of “The Seeking Shepherd.” It holds a great message for both the believer and the unbeliever, and Jesus applies it to both. Two things show this.

1. The words “these little ones” refer to genuine Christian believers, and the word “lost” refers to the unsaved person (see note, Mt. 18:5-10).
2. On this particular occasion Jesus was speaking to His disciples (Mt. 18:1). In Luke Jesus shared the same parable with a different audience and directed it more toward the lost.

Some believers are weak, never having grown in the Lord; others cool off and wander away; still others backslide into sin and shame. Some are stubborn toward the Lord, and some become self-centred because of hurt and neglect. Others allow the hurt and neglect to develop into bitterness and hostility against a person, and go out and sin in anger. There are innumerable reasons for sinning, but believers do sin, and some sin rather seriously.

The one who strays and the one who is lost are always with us. The thing to remember is this...

Mat 18:14 “In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.”

- I. Jesus came to save the lost (v. 11).
- II. Jesus seeks every lost one (v. 12).
- III. Jesus may or may not find lost one (v. 13).
- IV. Jesus forgives and rejoices over the lost one who is found (v. 13).
- V. God declares a wonderful truth: God wills that not a single soul be lost (v. 14).

I. *Mathew 18:11 Jesus Christ, the Saviour*

Jesus came to save the lost. Note that the NIV eliminates verse 11 here. We are including the verse and discussion in the commentary for those who wish to use it. The verse reads, “The Son of Man came to save what was lost” (v. 11).

This is the Messiah’s great statement of purpose; this is why He came to earth. He came to save the lost. There is a world of meaning in this great statement.

1. It means that Christ willingly and deliberately *left* the glory of heaven and His equality with God and “made Himself nothing” of that glory and equality (see notes, Ph. 2:6; 2:7).
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2. It means that both the world as a whole and man as an individual have gone astray. Each person has strayed away from God, is lost, and is wandering about in a wilderness of sin; and each person is doomed to be destroyed by that wilderness unless he is reached and saved by Christ. Everyone needs to be saved (Rom. 3:10-18, 23; 10:13; Jn. 3:16; Acts 10:43; 1 Jn. 5:1).
3. It means that *God lost man*. God lost man's worship and service and life. Not only has man *gone astray*, not only is man *not seeking* after God and gone out of the way — but he has become unprofitable, *lost to God* (Rom. 3:11-12). While man remains lost *in the wilderness*, God has no hope of fellowship with man. Man's worship, service, and life are lost to God as long as man remains lost. The words "that which was lost" should be noted. They are in the Greek neuter participle. This means that the person lost is not only man (masculine) but woman (feminine) as well. "That [neuter] which was lost" and sought after is both man and woman. The point is to show the span of Jesus' love: He loves all who are lost, both man and woman. No one is outside the scope of His love and seeking. He loves and seeks after all.

Thought 1. Note a striking truth: not only is man lost, but God has lost man and man has lost God. Both lose out and suffer when man chooses to wander out into the wilderness of the world and sin. Man has so much to gain from following God (Jn. 5:24; Gal. 5:22-23), and God has so much to gain by man's choosing to follow God (worship and service eternally).

II. *Mathew 18:12 Jesus Christ, the Seeking Shepherd*

Jesus seeks every single sheep that is lost. Christ made three significant points.

1. The sheep wandered off (see *Wilderness*, Mt. 18:12).
2. The sheep was sought by the shepherd. Note several facts.
 - a. The Shepherd takes care of the whole flock, the ninety-nine, in a very special way. While seeking the lost sheep, He leads the flock *into the mountains or hills* where the pasture is thick with grass and safe and secure. He makes sure that they are secure (Jn. 10:27-29).
 - b. The Shepherd's concern is for the individual, no matter how large the flock. He loves the individual. He is unwilling to lose a single one.
 - c. The Shepherd is the One who does the seeking. He does not hire or send another person after the lost sheep. Neither does He wait for the sheep to return, and most interesting, He does not even allow the care of the ninety-nine to keep Him from going after the one lost sheep. The fact that the sheep is lost is so important a matter to Him that He personally goes after the sheep — no matter the cost.
 - d. The Shepherd is patient and enduring. He seeks and seeks after the sheep until He has either found it or else He knows there is no hope of the sheep's being alive.

e. The Shepherd seeks every path, ridge and crevice; He uses every means at His disposal to find the lost sheep.

⇒ The Shepherd depends upon the hardness, danger, trials and sufferings of the wilderness and the heart, conscience and memory of the sheep to turn it around and begin seeking a way out.

⇒ The Shepherd depends upon his own knowledge of the sheep and wilderness to search for the sheep. The Shepherd knows every ridge and crevice of the wilderness. It is just a question of finding the sheep soon enough. Has the lost sheep gone too far out on a ridge, too far down into a crevice to be found? Has the lost sheep already been killed by enemies or the roughness of the wilderness?

⇒ The Shepherd depends rather heavily upon His voice to reach the ears and the heart of the lost sheep. By calling and calling, He hopes the lost sheep will hear Him. Whether He hears or not depends upon two things. (1) How far out into the wilderness the lost sheep has wandered? Can the sheep hear the voice of the Shepherd? (2) Does the sheep still have strength enough to answer (respond) even if he hears the voice of the Shepherd? Is the sheep so drained and sapped by the wilderness that he cannot answer? Or is the sheep injured or dying, unable to answer the call of the Shepherd?

Mat 18:12 *“What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off?”*

Luke 19:10 *“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”*

John 9:35 *Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”*

3. The sheep was sought in the mountains (see note 3, Lk. 15:4 for the reasons a sheep wanders off. The reasons are simply stated here.)

⇒ The sheep is attracted by something “out in the open country or wilderness” away from the flock and shepherd.

⇒ The sheep is aimless, not paying attention to what is going on.

⇒ The sheep refuses to heed the shepherd’s warnings and the other sheep’s example.

⇒ The sheep is not attached enough to the shepherd or to the other sheep.

Thought 1. The Shepherd knew “the lost sheep.” He had a large flock to tend, but He knew every single one. When “the lost sheep” got lost, the Shepherd knew it. He missed the sheep, and He went after it.

Thought 2. When a child is lost, a family stops everything to seek for the lost child. It does not matter how large the family is, the child is sought.

MATHEW 18:12 WORLD, WILDERNESS, OPEN COUNTRY

*“What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off?” **Mathew 18:12***

The sheep was lost in the open country or wilderness. The open country had an excitement about it. The unknown and the risk aroused the emotions; but once the sheep ventured out into the open country, he found its terrain rugged, full of narrow ridges and deep ravines and crevices. It was rough going, heavy with thick underbush, pricking thorns, dangerous footing; and, if the way out were never found, it would sap the sheep's strength and age him ever so rapidly. Eventually the open country would take its life.

The open country and thrills of the world do attract a person. The world has much to offer.

1. The world gives a man...

- occupation and purpose
- ego and self-esteem
- more and more honour
- plenty and wealth
- authority and power
- lifestyle and acceptance
- recognition and privilege
- position and image
- opportunity and satisfaction

2. The world stimulates and arouses a man, causing...

- his blood to rush
- escape
- butterflies
- cravings
- goose bumps
- desires
- his heart to beat faster
- relaxation

***1 John 2:15-16** Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world — the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does — comes not from the Father but from the world.*

***Gal 5:19-21** The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.*

Jer 50:6 “My people have been lost sheep; their shepherds have led them astray and caused them to roam on the mountains. They wandered over mountain and hill and forgot their own resting place.”

Ezek 34:6 My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them.

Mat 9:36 When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. □

III. *Mathew 18:13 The Lost; Unsaved*

Jesus may or may not find the lost sheep. Finding the sheep is not a sure thing. It depends on so much...

- How far astray has the lost sheep wandered? Can the lost sheep hear the voice of the Shepherd? Or is it too far off?
- Is the lost sheep willing to respond when it hears the Shepherd’s voice?
- Is the lost sheep *going on and on*, farther and farther into the wilderness or open country?
- Has the lost sheep been so careless and unconcerned that it has been injured by falling into a deep crevice?
- Is the mind of the lost sheep so numb that it is unconscious of the Shepherd’s presence and voice?
- Is the lost sheep aware that it is lost? If so, how concerned is it over being lost?
- Is the lost sheep concerned enough to begin searching for a way out of the wilderness or open country?
- Has the patience of the Shepherd ended? Has he given up? Has so much time passed that He knows there is no longer any hope?

Thought 1. A person may resist the spirit of God so long and wander so far into the wilderness of the world that he can never be found.

Thought 2. God says, “My Spirit will not contend with man forever” (Gen. 6:3; see Prov. 29:1). This is a needful warning, for when we feel pulled to make a decision and put the decision off for an hour or two (a half day or a day at most), the pull fades and eventually dies completely. God’s Spirit does not continue to strive with us. Most of us have experienced such movements and killed the Spirit’s pull or striving.

Gen 6:3 Then the Lord said, “My Spirit will not contend with man forever, for he is mortal; his days will be a hundred and twenty years.”

Prov 29:1 A man who remains stiff-necked after many rebukes will suddenly be destroyed — without remedy.

IV. *Mathew 18:13 The Joy of Salvation*

Jesus forgives and rejoices over the recovered sheep. The extreme joy is not because the lost sheep means more than the other sheep. The safe sheep have always filled the Shepherd with joy and peace, but there is a special moment of joy and celebration when a lost sheep is found. There are at least two reasons for this.

1. The lost sheep was almost *lost forever*, never to be known again or to share in and contribute to the life of the flock. All that the lost sheep meant and was capable of contributing was almost lost forever. There is bound to be great joy and glory over his being snatched out of the claws of danger and death.
2. The lost sheep cost so much of the Shepherd's life: His thoughts, energy, effort, time and sufferings. There is great joy and glory when the trial is over and the task is successful. The effort was well worth the price.

Note the great appeal to the lost sheep to return to the Shepherd. There is...

- no grudging
- no punishment
- no contempt
- only love
- no lecture
- only concern
- no rebuke
- only seeking
- no threat

Luke 15:6-7 “*And goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ 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.*”

John 4:36 “*Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests the crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together.*”

I Th 2:19-20 *For what is our hope, our joy or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy.*

Heb 12:2 *Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*

Psa 126:6 *He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him.*

V. *Mathew 18:14 Will of God: the Salvation of Every Man*

God wills that not a single sheep should be lost. In verse ten Jesus had said “My Father,” but here He switched to “your Father.” This is significant: when the Saviour *finds* each of us, we become a member of *our Father's* family. As a member, He expects our help in reaching the lost sheep and in caring for the flock. Being a member of the family carries with it the responsibilities of reaching the lost and of helping to care for the other members of the family.

Note two things.

1. The Father is not willing that any should be lost.

1 Tim 2:4 Who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

2 Pet 3:9 The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

2. Christ died for the weak brother as well as for the lost.

Rom 14:15 If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died.

1 Cor 8:11 So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge.

Thought 1. This is critical: God cares for every single person. What a contrast with our lack of concern when just one or two wander off. What a lesson for us! The concern of God for a single soul! ■