

The parable of the wandering sheep \* Matthew 18:1-15, Galatians 6:1, James 5:19-20  
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When I was in university, I had a friend who had a profound impact on my faith. I learned to walk with Jesus from him, I learned to pray from him, I learned to worship from him, and yet now, twenty years later, I'm a pastor and he wants nothing to do with the Church.

I'm sure I'm not the only one who knows people like that. I'll bet that you know people too – neighbours or relatives or even friends you used to sit beside in church – who are in that same boat.

The parable that we're going to look at today gives us a chance to think about people like these and to ask the question: 'How does God feel about wandering sheep?'

When people say they've come to faith but then lose interest in walking with God, are they gone for good? Does God give up on people who give up on Him?

Let's go to the parable and see what Jesus has to say. Matthew 18:12-14.

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? [implied – Of course! Of course he'll do that!].

13 And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off.

14 In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost. (Mat 18:12-14 NIV).

Now, I know what you're thinking. Graham, this is not about wandering sheep, this is about LOST sheep. Jesus is not talking about believers here, He is talking about people who don't yet believe in Him. The sheep in this story are unbelievers – hence the title 'the LOST sheep.' Your Bible might even have a heading saying 'the parable of the lost sheep.'

And I'll tell you, when I started working on this parable, I just kind of assumed that that was true too. If you look on the series outline that I gave you a few weeks back, I wrote 'the parable of the lost sheep' and assumed that Jesus was talking about lost people.

But when I started to get into this passage, I realized that I was bringing Jesus' teaching in Luke over into Jesus' teaching in Matthew. And it's easy to do – you'll probably notice that there's no verse 11 in your Bible; that's because some eager scribe took Jesus' words in Luke 'I've come to seek and save the lost' – and plopped them here in Matthew to emphasize the point.

The problem though is that that's not the point that Jesus is making here. In Luke 15, Jesus *does* use the idea of the shepherd going after one lost sheep to talk about unbelieving people. But here in Matthew, Jesus is using the same illustration to make a different point. (That's why v. 11 is gone now, because the stewards of the Bible realized it didn't belong there in the first place).

There are two reasons that I'm confident of that – that Jesus is talking about wandering sheep here – ie., believers who wander – not unbelievers.

First, it's because chapter 18 is ALL about believers. Every verse before this parable is about people who believe. Every verse after this parable is about people who believe. If we're going to hear what Jesus is saying, we need to hear the parable in light of what Jesus has just said and what Jesus goes on to say. So the fact that Jesus tells this parable in the midst of a conversation about believers make me think that this is about wandering sheep, ie., believers who have wandered off track. That's the first reason.

I think the second reason is even better. Because, second, there's a key word in this parable that links up with what Jesus has already said that clearly shows that Jesus is talking about believers. Look at verse 14.

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

Who exactly are these little ones?

If you slide up the page to what Jesus has just said, you'll see that in verse 6, Jesus defines 'little one' as 'people who believe in Him.' And if you go up a little further, verse 3, verse 4, verse 5, you see Jesus calling people who humble themselves to rely on God, 'little ones.'

So when Jesus says in verse 14, 'your Father is not willing that any of these 'little ones' should be lost, He's talking about believers. He's talking about people who have already put their faith in Him but who have for some reason gone astray. That means that if we are going to hear the lesson that Jesus is teaching, we need to hear this parable as a lesson about believers who have wandered. So let's look at it again with that in mind.

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?"

Now immediately, this makes the parable make a lot more sense. If 'the Lord is my Shepherd,' then I am His sheep. When we believe in Him, we belong to Him. We are a part of His flock. When one of us goes astray, He leaves the ninety-nine and goes off to find the one that wandered.

13 And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off.

14 In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost. (Mat 18:12-14 NIV).

Jesus is telling us here three things about our Father in Heaven and His attitude towards wandering sheep:

1. God seeks wandering sheep. In the world of the parable, the shepherd going to find the sheep is just a matter of course. There's no debate about it, there's no controversy here. Jesus says: 'What do you think? Will he not go and get it?' – rhetorically speaking – 'of course he will!' It just makes sense that if one sheep goes missing, the shepherd's not going to say 'oh well, that one's not worth much and I've got the other ninety-nine.' No, he just goes, leaving the other sheep behind to find the one sheep that's gone astray.

Bring that from the world of the parable into our world and what is Jesus teaching us? God seeks wandering sheep. When one believer goes astray, they're led astray by someone else or they get themselves enmeshed in sin or they just kind of wander off, God doesn't say 'Oh well, no big loss;' God goes out of His way to find and bring back that lost sheep. God doesn't give up on them; God goes after them, actively, to bring them home. So 1. – God seeks wandering sheep.

2. BECAUSE God doesn't want to lose even one. That's verse 14: In the same way your Father in heaven *is not willing* that any of these little ones should be lost (Mat 18:14 NIV).

That means that when one of Jesus' followers goes wandering off, God notices. God is moved by their absence and He is NOT WILLING to lose even one. I mean, He has already paid the price for that one precious sheep, He gave the life of His one and only Son so that that sheep could live; He's not now going to say 'oh well, one loss isn't much.' No. God hates the idea of losing even one precious sheep for whom Jesus died.

And so that 1. God seeks wandering sheep because 2. God doesn't want to lose even one.

And 3. When He brings them back, God doesn't resent them for having gone astray but delights to have them back.

Think in the world of the parable. When the shepherd realizes that one of his sheep is missing, he probably goes 'oh man, what a hassle,' but then he says to himself 'I want that sheep back. I don't want to lose even one and so I don't care what it's going to take. I will rescue that wandering sheep.'

And when he finally does, he doesn't resent the sheep for the work he had to do to find it; he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. He is overjoyed that what was lost is now found.

Bring that into the real world and what does it say? Jesus is teaching us that when God brings back one of His own, He does not resent that person but delights to have them back again. He is not going to hold a grudge and say 'so-and-so you'd better be on your best behaviour now;' He is simply overwhelmed with joy knowing that the one who was lost has now been found.

In Luke, Jesus says 'there's more joy in heaven when one sinner turns from his sin to be a believer;' here in Matthew, Jesus says 'there's just as much joy when God brings a wandering believer home.'

God seeks wandering sheep because He is not willing to lose even one and He doesn't resent them for going astray, He delights to have them home.

God seeks wandering sheep and refuses to lose a single one.

That's what parable means; what does it mean for us? What's our part in all of this? Let's assume that we're all walking with Jesus; we are all 'little ones' who have humbled ourselves to depend on God; what do Jesus tell us to do in light of this? I think that there are three postures that we are called to have. And these come from the verses immediately before and immediately after the parable.

So, if we are not wandering sheep and we know wandering sheep, there are three postures that we are called to have.

First, don't look down on wandering sheep. That's verse ten. Jesus tells us: 'See that you do not look down on/despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven. (Mat 18:10 NIV).' That 'angels' piece is simply to say that you might not think highly of these people but Heaven clearly does, but the key here is the first part. If you're actively following Jesus and at home in the flock, don't look down on people who have wandered away. If we are following Jesus day-by-day, it can be easy to look down our noses at other people who once knew God but have wandered off. It can be easy to judge them or to say 'how could they be so easily misled?' But what does Jesus say? Don't despise them. Don't look down on them.

Instead, second posture: humbly point out their fault.

That's the very next verse after this parable. Verse 15: 15 "If your brother sins (against you),<sup>i</sup> go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over" (Mat 18:15 NIV).

It's very easy when dealing with sinning believers to go to one of two extremes – one is to get so offended by their sin that we want nothing to do with them and end up despising them. The other though is just as bad; it's recognizing sin but doing nothing about it. Tolerating sin is just as dangerous as ostracizing somebody for it. Instead, Jesus says here: if a sheep has wandered off course, humbly go to them and point out that sin, knowing that you could just as easily need someone to come to you to do the same thing down the line.

First posture: Don't despise a wandering believer but instead, second, point out their sin and -

Third posture: help them deal with their sin. Pray for them, help them to be accountable, join with them in doing the hard work of cutting off the hands and desires of sin. (That's verses 8 and 9 – this all fits together). Jesus doesn't say that here but Paul does in Galatians 6:1: Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. [Help them to deal with their sin!]. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.

The reality is that on this side of eternity, we as believers will all struggle with sin; the good news though is that God Himself seeks wandering sheep and we can help each other in our struggle.

That's the big idea that I want you to take home today:

God seeks wandering sheep and we can help to bring them home. God seeks wandering sheep and we can help to bring them home.

Let me just take a minute to apply that.

First, God seeks wandering sheep and there are a couple of ways that believers wander. First, God seeks wandering sheep who have been led astray by other believers.

The heartbreaking reality that many of us are all too aware of in this congregation is that like Jesus said in verse 6, some believers cause other believers to sin. Some pastors lead their congregations astray when they themselves make bad, sinful personal decisions that call into question the goodness of God that they themselves proclaimed. There are people who have wandered away from God because their

pastor has wandered himself. There are people who have wandered away from God because they've been hurt or caught up in the fall out of a pastor's implosion. There are people who have been hurt by other believers and they just give up on God and walk away. God seeks those people.

Jesus tells us here that God goes out of His way to track them down. He doesn't want to lose them. He is not willing to lose them. He goes out to find them and doesn't resent them when He brings them home. They may have a hard time going back to church and so they stay away but God can't bear the thought of losing people for whom His Son has already died. God seeks wandering sheep who have been led astray by other believers.

Not only that, second: God seeks wandering sheep who wandered because of their own sin. We all know people who have seemed to walk with God in the past, but wandered off to do their own thing. We have kids and relatives and neighbours who have come to church and seemed to be engaged then are now caught up in doing things that aren't exactly God-honouring.

I think that this parable invites us to believe that God seeks even them. If they truly are believers, if God has called them to Himself, then we have every reason to believe that God is at work to bring them back into the fold. As J. R. R. Tolkien wrote, all who wander are not lost; and I think this parable gives us hope that God is not going to give up on the ones we love who used to love Him.

And third, if you're wandering, God is looking for you. When you get tied up in sin, it's so easy to think that God is fed up with you, wants nothing to do with you. You can start to think that God's going to give up on you. He doesn't. Jesus teaches us here that you are so important to God that He goes out of His way to bring you home. In the language of the parable, God has left the rest of the flock to come and find you because He doesn't want to lose you; call out to Him and let Him bring you home. He's not going to resent you for it. Verse 13: He is happier about that one sheep [that He found] than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off (Mat 18:13 NIV).

So know this: God seeks wandering sheep AND we can help to bring them home.

If you know believers who have been led astray, if you know believers who seem to be mired in sin, help them to come home.

Don't despise them; don't look down on them. With unconditional love and humility, point out the sin. Point out that even if a pastor has failed them, Jesus never will. Remind them that even if they feel like they've failed themselves because of their sin, Jesus will never fail them. And help them to deal with their sin to come back to fold, back to the Lord.

The very last verses of the letter of James say exactly that: James 5:19-20 - 19 My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, 20 remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.

God seeks wandering sheep AND we can help to bring them home.

Pray:

For people who have been led astray. For people who are mired in sin.  
For us as a congregation to partner in Jesus' work to rescue sinners of all kinds.

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<sup>i</sup> “Εἰς σέ (eis se, “against you”) is omitted by κ B f1 copsa, bo mss Origen Basil3/6 Cyril. If the omission was original, the words were added very early, perhaps to make the general case (suggested by the omission) apply more tightly to the sins of the immediate context. But one might equally argue that omission was an early change designed to generalize the passage. Moreover, because η (ē), η (ē), and ει (ei) were all pronounced the same way in NT times, it is easy to see how ἁμαρτήση [εἰς σέ] (hamartēsē [eis se], “sins against you”) could foster errors in writing down dictation. UBS4 and NA27 include the words with square brackets, indicating considerable doubt” (D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” *Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Revised Series: Matthew-Mark*, Commentary on Matthew 18:15-20, note 15, (Olive Tree Digital)).