



SIN AND FORGIVENESS
PURSUE SINNERS RECKLESSLY
MATTHEW 18:10-14
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“See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven. ¹² What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? ¹³ And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. ¹⁴ So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

Introduction

Today is the second in our series on *Sin & Forgiveness*. And I must tell you, this passage of Scripture has been very challenging and deeply convicting to me personally. To explain why, let me tell you about the Ministry Staff's experience of praying through our Church Directory.

We took several months to pray through the Directory, page by page. We'd pause over the faces and names, identify the individuals, briefly talk about where they're serving or how long they've been involved at Calvary. This was a very rewarding and rich experience.

But it was also troubling. Troubling because on every other page we'd come across individuals or families that were no longer here. Of course, no one likes to see people leave your church. But we all also recognize that good people come and go for good reasons all the time.

No, what troubled me wasn't that people were no longer here; it was that some people simply disappeared. They seemed to have completely fallen off the radar. One day they're here; the next day they're gone. And no one around the Staff table appears to have any clue whatever happened to them!

These missing persons include individuals I've baptized, shared communion with, enjoyed meals together, provided pastoral counsel to, even dedicated their children. And now, I'm ashamed to say, I have no idea where they are.

What's happened to them? I trust they're doing well, thriving in their faith, and are happily attending some other church. But there's no guarantee. Maybe they've gone missing or wandered away. Or, worse yet, perhaps they've been lead astray, and even now have turned away from faith in Christ.

Why Do Sheep Stray?

What makes the disappearance of sheep doubly difficult is this fact I've learned from experience of interacting with straying sheep: *Sheep stray because of sin.*

Sometimes *the sin of others* drives sheep away. An ugly piece of gossip can turn a good sheep into a neutral sheep; and if that piece of gossip festers, it can cause a neutral sheep to become a bad sheep, one that's ready to leave the fold.

But sometimes it's a *sheep's own sin* that causes him to stray. A person falls into sin, whether adultery or bitterness, and this unaddressed sin causes the person to drift away, so as to avoid having his sin seen by others.

Either way, whether because of their own or someone else's sin, sheep stray as a result. They wander away, leaving the fold.

Despising Little Ones

Sadly, however, we can be very complacent about straying sheep.

Sometimes we're simply *unaware* that one of God's little ones has gone missing. This is the great challenge of big churches: God's little ones simply get lost in the crowd; they fall through the cracks and no one seems to care, or even notice. You weren't aware of their presence, and thus you're not too terribly concerned about their absence.

But sometimes we we're just plain *unconcerned* about God's little ones. We know the person's no longer around, but we're simply not motivated to do anything about it. Sometimes this is because we're lazy; we don't want to be bothered.

Sometimes it's because of fear: we're afraid of what might happen if we pursue the person who has strayed. What if they don't react well, or take offense at the fact that we're reaching out?

Sometimes we've been hurt by a person that's no longer here and, frankly, we're glad to see them go. And sometimes—perhaps often—we just don't think it matters all that much. We're unmotivated to go after lost sheep because we just don't think it really matters.

Christians can be like the three Pevensie children, Peter, Susan and Lucy, from C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, when they learned that their brother Edmund had gone missing. They were enjoying a scrumptious dinner and delightful conversation at Mr. Beaver's house, when they suddenly realized their brother Edmund was nowhere to be found.

All the children had been attending so hard to what Mr. Beaver was telling them that they had noticed nothing else for a long time. Then during the moment of silence that followed his last remark, Lucy suddenly said:

"I say—where's Edmund?"

There was a dreadful pause, and then everyone began asking "Who saw him last? How long has he been missing? Is he outside?" and then all rushed to the door and looked out. The snow was falling thickly and steadily, the green ice of the pool had vanished under a thick white blanket, and from where the little house stood in the

center of the dam you could hardly see either bank. Out they went, plunging well over their ankles into the soft new snow, and went round the house in every direction. “Edmund! Edmund!” they called till they were hoarse. But the silently falling snow seemed to muffle their voices and there was not even an echo in answer.

“How perfectly dreadful!” said Susan as they at last came back in despair. “Oh, how I wish we’d never come.”¹

It is indeed a dreadful thing to lose a brother or sister! But how easily, and almost imperceptibly, it can happen with the family of faith, so that by the time we realize a brother or sister has gone missing, it’s too late. The person’s gone, and we have no way to track them down. We may call out their name, only to hear not even an echo in return.

Jesus has a word for this lack of care and concern for lost sheep. He calls it *despising*. And he expressly speaks against it in this passage: “See that you do not despise one of these little ones” (v. 10).

To despise something is to treat it as though he had little or no value. When you despise something, you don’t care therefore what happens to it; you don’t care if it gets lost, or stolen, or broken, or eaten by your dog.

In fact, what you despise, you’re usually glad to get rid of; you may even throw it away yourself. Trash, three days old, is something we despise. Ants on the countertop or in the cookie jar is something we despise. Dirt on the freshly swept kitchen floor is something we despise. Mold on the shower walls is something we despise. And thus we’re glad to see it go!

Christians sometimes treat straying sheep this way.

The Will of The Father Who Is In Heaven

But what our Lord Jesus wants us to understand is that his heavenly Father doesn’t despise a single one of his sheep. It’s not the heart of the Father to neglect one of his little ones, even for a moment. This is the foundational insight of this passage: “So it is not *the will of my Father* who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish” (v. 14).

Our heavenly Father does not want to lose—indeed, will not lose—a single one of his sheep. In fact, he can’t tolerate it! And Jesus wants us to understand this about the Father’s will; indeed, he wants us to see this about the Father’s heart, so that we too might share the Father’s heart for his straying sheep.

His Keeps An Eye on Them Constantly

Jesus wants us to understand, first of all, that our heavenly Father *keeps his eye on his sheep constantly*. That’s the point, I think, of his fascinating reference to angels in v. 10: ““See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.”

¹ C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, pp. 82-83.

To say that angels always see the face of the Father is a way of saying that angels are constantly and perfectly in tune with the will of God, with what God wants done in the world. After all, that's why angels exist. The book of Hebrews says this of angels: "Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?" (1:14).

Angels, you might say, are recklessly focused. They've got their eyes completely fixed on one thing, and one thing only: the Father's face. They're only interested in doing God's will. Everything else is irrelevant to them. And thus, through these magnificent ministering spirits, as Scripture calls them, God keeps a constant eye on each and every one of his children. You're never out of sight. He's always got an eye on you.

Prioritizes Individually

But Jesus also wants us to understand, secondly, that the heavenly Father *prioritizes each one individually*. To get this point across to us, Jesus tells a parable of a shepherd and his lost sheep.

What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? (v. 12)

We tend to be content with what remains, rather than with what's been lost. If we have 85%, then we're good with that. I remember a college buddy describing his Army paratrooper training. He describes how important it is, once you've landed, to quickly identify with the rest of your team. Because, evidently, the Army drills into these soldiers the 80% rule: once 80% of the troops have landed and are identified, you move on, even if it means leaving 20% of your colleagues behind!

Jesus, however, says that God is like a loving shepherd, who won't leave *even one behind*. He prioritizes each one of his sheep individually; he knows where they are at all times. He's willing to take risks to seek out even a single sheep that's strayed.

Celebrates Wildly

But there's a third aspect of the Father's will Jesus wants us to see. Not only does the heavenly Father prioritize each of his little ones individually, he also *celebrates their return wildly*. This is the second part of the parable of the Lost Sheep: "And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray" (v. 13).

The parable of the Prodigal Son puts this third principle in the form of a story. We see the father *celebrate recklessly* over the son's return. The prodigal son had lived recklessly in a foreign land, squandering his entire inheritance. But then he came to his senses, and decided to return to his father.

And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his

feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate (Luke 15:20-24).

Our heavenly Father celebrates wildly when even one of his little ones returns. He’s prepared to throw a big party. That’s his will, that’s his heart, that’s how he cares for each and every one of his sheep.

The Father’s Death-Embracing Determination to Protect His Little Ones

So, you see, this passage is intended to help us to understand the Father’s will and to see the Father’s heart. And what we see is a God who doesn’t despise but recklessly pursues his children who have strayed.

Sadly, some of you didn’t have a father who was reckless for you; he was, instead, reckless with you. He didn’t protect you from harm, he exposed you to it. That’s a tragedy. That grieves your heavenly Father’s heart.

But you need to know something: God the Father loves you. He is completely and entirely for you in Christ. And he will be forever and without fail. He will not let anything happen to you. No one will snatch you out of the Father’s hand.

How can you be so confident that God has that kind of commitment to you? *Because your heavenly Father has already embraced death for you.* God already gave *himself* by giving his one and only Son; so that now you can count on this: the Father will not dishonor the death of his Son. Jesus’ shed blood will accomplish everything the Father purposes.

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? (Rom. 8:31-32).

Am I My Brother’s Keeper?

This passage shows us two critical things. *First*, it shows us the great love the Father has for his own children. So much so that he gave his one and only Son for the sake of his enemies, whom he adopted as his children and has enfolded into his family.

But, *second*, it shows us the vital role God’s children play in keeping God’s children. Unlike Cain, who despised his brother Abel, we are indeed our brother’s and our sister’s keeper.

Making This Concern Practical

But if we’re going to do this—and reflect our heavenly Father’s heart for his own children—then, it’s going to require from us the right kind of attitude and prayerful, thoughtful action.

And it’s going to need to begin at the top. Elders and pastors and others spiritual leaders of the church are going to need to be utterly convinced that it really matters. We’re going to need to take seriously Paul’s charge to the elders of the church in Ephesus: “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood” (Acts 20:28).

But congregants also have a responsibility to intentionally put themselves under this kind of shepherding care. Here’s why: *Straying sheep don’t want to be found.* Straying means sinning

in a way that separates you from the community of faith; but when you're sinning you typically don't want to be found, but left alone. So sheep ought, in their better moments, to bring themselves under elder care and accountability, so that when they truly need it, but may not want it, they will nonetheless have it, without even asking for it.

In order for this to happen, however, you're going to have to do something very un-American: submit and obey. This is the plain teaching of Scripture; but notice the purpose: "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, *for that would be of no advantage to you*" (Heb. 13:17). It's in your best interest to have others keeping watch over your souls; that's to your great advantage.

Three Concrete Steps

Those are necessary attitudes. But here are three specific steps you can take to turn shepherding care into reality in your life.

First, and real simple, you can sign the Registry each week. That's one of the main reasons why we use the Registry. Some wonder if we're checking up on you? Yes, that's exactly what we're doing! It's a weekly status report on the state of our flock. Are they in the fold? Any gone astray? Of course, it's not perfect. But it's something, and it's better than nothing.

Second, and a little more involved, you can become a member of this local church. There are a variety of ways to think about membership; one way to think about it is that it's like a country club membership that requires you to pay membership dues but also entitles you to complain when they change the food on the menu. Another, more biblical way to think about membership is that it's a way of placing yourself under the shepherding care of this church.

Third, you can join a small group. Envision small groups as special ops teams, small enough to do reconnaissance and search and rescue missions on believers who've gone astray, perhaps who've even been taken captive behind enemy lines. These kinds of small groups are where Galatians 6:1 "spiritual restoration" takes place.

A Closing Challenge

As we turn our attention to the Table, there is one final and fourth step you and I can take. *We can discern the body.*

We are commanded in Scripture *to examine ourselves* before we come to the Lord's Table. "Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat and drink of the cup" (1 Cor. 11:28).

But what we often fail to appreciate is what it is we're to be primarily concerned about when we examine ourselves: not our own secret sins, but *how we have treated others within the Body of Christ.*

Listen to the next verse: "For anyone who eats and drinks *without discerning the body* eats and drinks judgment on himself" (v. 29). Notice that phrase: *discerning the body*. It's the focus of our own self-examination. But, of course, it's not our own physical body; we don't have to take our blood pressure or check our heart beat or weigh ourselves before taking communion.

No, it's referring to the *Lord's body*, the body of Christ, the church. We must not come to the Table and eat without giving due consideration to the body of Christ, and how we stand in relation to it and the member of it.

God is on mission to not lose a single sheep. But he calls us—his sheep—to join him in his mission, to share his burden, to reflect his priorities in our priorities.

And we get on board with God's mission when we *pursue sinners recklessly*; that is, when we leave the ninety-nine to pursue the one, and should that one be found, we rejoice more over that one than the others!

Amen.

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