

Selected Parables in Matthew's Gospel

“The Parable of the Lost Sheep”

Passages: Romans 13:1–10

Matthew 18:10–20

We usually think of the Parable of the Lost Sheep as a story about evangelism—Jesus, the Good Shepherd, goes far and wide to bring in the lost sheep. We, then, go on to talk about how we should also do evangelism in this way. We also pray for our non-Christians neighbours and friends, referring to them as “lost sheep”, hoping that we might follow Jesus example and bring them into the Kingdom.

Sounds good! Sounds Biblical! But is it??? Yes and No! In Luke's Gospel, the Parable of the Lost Sheep is a parable about evangelism. Jesus is talking to the Pharisees and blatantly tells them this Parable (as well as the parables of the Lost Coin and Lost Sons in order to show them the heart of the Father towards sinners and tax collectors...towards non-believers. They are the Lost Sheep!

But that's not what this Parable of the Lost Sheep is about in Matthew's Gospel! Even though it's the exact same parable, the context of Matthew's Gospel shows us that the parable is not about evangelism at all! In fact, what we will discover today is that the lost sheep of Jesus' parable are not outsiders...not unbelievers...not lost publicans and sinners. No, the lost sheep that Jesus is talking about in this Gospel are actually believers—members of the Jesus' ‘church’! **This parable of the lost sheep** is all about encouraging believers to stick it out as believers, even when Christian community is hard and we'd like to give up!

Let's pray.

Turn with me to Matthew 18..., but instead of going straight to the Parable, let's begin by exploring the context of the passage starting with verses 1 to 11. The caption that headlines these

verses tells us a lot—“The Greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven”. In this story, we overhear Jesus’ disciples arguing amongst themselves about who of them is the greatest and who will be seated at Jesus’ right hand in glory. To settle their dispute, they naively ask Jesus to choose between them!

I hope you can already see the fundamental problem that is surfacing here! For several years, Jesus has been gradually revealing the Kingdom of Heaven to his disciples. As He does this, He expects them to begin to understand (at the very least) that His Kingdom is very different to kingdoms of this world. In fact, according to the Sermon on the Mount, the value system of God’s Kingdom was the exact opposite to that of this world. In God’s economy, the first would be last and the last would be first. In God’s Kingdom, the humble and poor would be raised while the proud and mighty would be brought down from their thrones. In other words, God’s Kingdom was a place where God ruled as a loving Father and Jesus gave Himself equally to all as our generous brother. This was the Kingdom of Heaven that had come to earth in Jesus Christ.

The disciples, however, clearly misunderstood all this! Two years down the track and their earthly minds still conjured up visions of ‘greatness’ based on a man-made idea of **hierarchy**. Of course, hierarchy depends on the idea of competition; competition brings in the notion of winners and losers. The end result is division, not unity, within the family of God!

And that’s obviously why Jesus called a little child to stand in their midst. It’s why Jesus said to His disciples, **“Unless you change...change your mind, change your thinking... and become like little children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven.”** What did Jesus mean when He said **“become like little children”**?

I was at the Seafood place on Penshurst Street the other day. While I was waiting for my fish to be grilled, two little girls were

there with their mother. The older of the two girls (4 years old) was proudly telling all the customers in the shop the details about her 2-year old sister's efforts at potty training...in great detail! Now, the little sister didn't mind at all...and the older sister was oblivious to the impact of what she was saying. It was only their mother who was horrified, while the rest of us in the shop couldn't stop laughing!

It was a classic example of what children are like—they have no thought of greatness or superiority. They instinctively treat everyone the same, without any notion of protocol or hierarchy (...what we often call “manners”). “Kids are just kids!” And that's what Jesus was trying to say when He commanded us to become like little children—to stop hiding behind man-made systems of hierarchy and protocol. That's what the Kingdom of Heaven is all about-- equality, honesty, openness, fellowship! We must become like those 2 naïve little children.

Now, when you get this picture in your mind, you discover how extremely sad it must have been for Jesus to see His disciples arguing over 'greatness'. And the worst thing is that the disciples actually asked Jesus to choose between them! Do you see? By asking Jesus to play favourites, **they were actually asking this 'Good Shepherd' to divide up His flock!**

Now, that's the context in which Jesus tells the Parable of the Lost Sheep! Once you understand that fact, then you'll easily see that the parable is not about evangelism—it's not about **us** and our prowess in bringing home the lost sheep. No, the parable is about the church, and about **Jesus' power**, as the Good Shepherd, to bring us together as One flock. Jesus tells the Parable of the Lost Sheep in direct response to the disciples' insensitivity to the unity of Christ's church.

Listen to the Parable again.

Mt 18:12-14 **“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? 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. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.**

Who is the man? It is Jesus, the good shepherd, who will not allow His ‘little ones’...His flock to be divided, split up or scattered. For not only does He treat all His sheep equally, but if, by chance, something does stir up division in the flock causing one of His sheep to wander (Greek– ‘to be deceived’) from the fold, Jesus will be there as quick as a wink, to bring the lost sheep home. Furthermore, because all His sheep are equal in His sight, each one is equally precious to Him! That means that He will leave the rest of the fold in order to restore His flock to its full number. There will always be **“one shepherd and one flock”**.

Of course, that’s not all that the context of the Parable tells us. As with most of Jesus’ parables, the verses that follow it are there, essentially, to help us **apply the parable** to our own lives.

Let’s look at verses 15 to 20, verse by verse.

The application goes like this: Since Jesus, the Good Shepherd, doesn’t want His sheep to be divided or scattered and lost, then it is imperative that we, as His sheep, must never allow work our differences to divide us. In fact, well before division starts to rear its ugly head, the Good Shepherd gives us this advice:

Mt 18:15 **“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.**

It’s clear, isn’t it? Work out your differences! Don’t let little things divide you.

And if that step towards reconciliation doesn’t work, don’t give up—try a second approach!

Mt 18:16 **But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’**

The point is simple—don't stop trying to resolve the differences between you. Why? Because the Good Shepherd will not tolerate division amongst His sheep! Now, of course, that step towards reconciliation may not work either, ...but that's no excuse to give up! The Good Shepherd says, "Try again!"

Mt 18:17 ***If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church;***

You know, when we get to this verse, most commentators make the huge mistake of thinking that Jesus is talking about some sort of public discipline of the offender. But the parable doesn't lend itself to that sort of approach. After all, the Good Shepherd loves His sheep! And so, if you read this verse within that larger context, you will quickly see that the name of the game is **reconciliation**! Since the good shepherd will not tolerate a divided flock, we must do whatever we can to keep His sheep from leaving the fold! That may mean getting everyone in the church to tell that one sheep how important they are to the flock. Get everyone to show their love. Get everyone to encourage that one sheep to stick it out. That's why you "**tell it to the church**"! It's not intended to publicly humiliate them, but to publicly endorse them as a valued member of the church...to keep the flock intact.

Now, of course, sheep can be known for their stubbornness and hard-headedness. So, what do you do if that one sheep still insists on leaving the flock, even when all the other sheep are begging him to stay? The Good Shepherd has a difficult word for us:

Mt 18:17b ***...and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.***

As I understand it, Jesus is telling us that there's a point at which we need to give up trying to coerce someone to stay in the church community! I can see **three reasons** for this advice:

First, it's quite possible that a person who wants to abandon his church community is not a Christian after all—he is not one of Jesus' sheep, even though they may have been in our fellowship for years! The Apostle John speaks about this phenomenon in 1 John 2:19. **“They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.”**

I know it may sound uncharitable...even un-Christian...to let go of someone like this, but think about it: Any person who receives delegation after delegation of people who express their love and forgiveness towards him, yet who still refuses to be reconciled to them is someone who flagrantly opposes the wider claims of Christ. After all, Christ's Gospel is the Gospel of Reconciliation. Even if this person says he's a Christian, his resistance to reconciliation betrays the fact that he obviously doesn't want to pay the price of humility and mutual forgiveness. That's where Jesus advice kicks in! **Let him go! Cut him loose! Treat him as an unbeliever.**

The **second** reason why there may come a time when we must give up trying to convince someone to stay in the church is purely around the pragmatic use of time. If the church keeps expending all its energy trying to win one discontented member back to the fold, the rest of the flock may become disheartened and disillusioned. In other words, it may provoke other cracks to appear in the unity of the church. And so, by letting go of someone who doesn't want to be with us, we can get back to the business of mutual encouragement and strengthening. We can be a community again, with a common emphasis of binding the church together in Christ's love!

But there's a **third** reason why Jesus tells us to cut loose a person who doesn't want to stay with us and that's **prayer!** You see, as soon as you let go of someone and no longer insist that it's your responsibility to bring them back to the fold, something subtly changes in your thinking—you begin to entrust that person totally into the hands of the Good Shepherd, since you can do nothing about it! Simply speaking, by seeing them as a pagan or tax collector (and not as a Christian) it makes you far more prayerful for them! Not only will you begin to intercede for them and wrestle in prayer on their behalf, you will also have an evangelistic heart for them—exchanging the Parable of the Lost Sheep from Matthew into the one from Luke!

It's only when you read the Parable of the Lost Sheep in this way that you can better appreciate Jesus' closing advice in **verses 18–20**. You see, if this entire passage (starting in verse 1) is about the church of Jesus Christ (of which He is the Good Shepherd), then the underlying message of the passage is one of unity—It's all about how the community of faith can be maintained.

And so, Jesus says one final word to us...

Mt 18:18-20 "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."

Jesus' closing advice is profound, yet so simple—I want you to **pray for the church! And how should we pray?**

1. In prayer, **Bind** your church as one. Bind the people of the church together...especially those who are on the fringe... that we all might show love to one another. Bind the ministries of the church together that, together, we might display a unified hope in God's goodness. Bind the voice of the church together that we might declare God's truth without faltering. Bind the outreach of the church that we all might reflect God's compassion to the world. In short, prayerfully **bind the church in the unity of the Godhead.**
2. In prayer, **loose** your church from the pettiness of the world and from the deceits of the devil. Loose it from its focus on worldly 'greatness' and showmanship. Loose her into a

freedom of the Spirit and a new-found desire to be a beacon of celebration and life to the community. Loose it that she might be everything God is calling her to be. **Loose the church into her divinely appointed destiny!**

3. In prayer, **come together** around Jesus. As small communities and cells, keep **agreeing** as one about the expansion of God's Kingdom on earth. Pray to the Father about His Kingdom and that His will might be done. And as you pray, be assured that the good Shepherd is at work in your midst, making His church beautiful-- He is expanding her territory; He is maintaining her unity; He is causing His church to flourish despite the setbacks. **Come together** in prayer, for there I, the Good Shepherd, will always be found, in the midst of my people!

I hope you can see that, in Matthew's Gospel, the Parable of the Lost Sheep is ultimately about **us**...about Christ's church! For Jesus calls us, not to tear each other down in divisive thinking **but to join Him** in building and expanding His Kingdom on earth, with Him, the Good Shepherd, in the centre of it all!

Let's pray.