

Series: ***The Parables of Jesus***

## The Parable of the Lost Sheep

### **Matthew 18:10-14 (ESV)**

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.*

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.*

### **The Lady & Her Lost Daughter**

A certain lady sat down to dinner. Already seated at the table was her husband and three of their four children. The lady noticed that one of their daughters was missing. She assumed that she was at a friend’s house. She politely said to her husband, “Honey, have you noticed that one of our children is missing?” He responded, “Yes, but why should we worry, we still have three others.” What will this mother do?

### **The Youth Minister & the Lost Youth**

Or suppose you are a conscientious youth minister and you take 60 youth to Six Flags. You instruct them meet at noon at the pizza shop near the front gate. At noon as the youth gather and you start counting, you count 59. You count one more time and again you come up with 59. Does the youth minister say, “Oh well, 59 is pretty close. Ok Everyone, let’s eat!”? What will this youth minister do?

### **The Company Picnic & the Lost Child**

Or suppose you’re at a company picnic in a large state park. The families of all the employees have gathered for the annual picnic. You are just sitting down to eat with your family and someone calls out that a child is missing. What will you do? Will you continue to eat your lunch?



### **God & His Lost Child**

Or suppose you’re the God of the universe and you’re watching over all your children on face of the earth. You notice one clan is having some “discussions” about who is the greatest. You notice that some of the more quiet & reserved of your children in that clan are beginning to feel alienated and pushed out and so they begin to wander away from the clan. What will you do?

This is the question of this parable before us this morning. When one of God’s sheep wander, what will He do?

## What Happened to Verse 11?

If you were paying close attention, you might be wondering what happened to verse 11, “For the Son of man came to save the lost.” Some of your translations may included verse 11 and some may not. The NASB brackets the verse. The reason for this is that the oldest manuscripts do not contain this verse at this point. This verse is included in Luke 19:10 but it’s not found here in the oldest extant copies that we have. In some of the copies it appears that some scribe inserted the verse in the margin, but in the oldest copies, which are the ones closest to the original, the verse is not there. So I’m not going to include verse 11 in the discussion this morning.

## Two Versions of This Parable

We find a similar version to this parable in Luke 15:3-7, but there are some distinct differences. In Luke Jesus tells the parable to the Pharisees in response to their criticism of Him for “receiving and eating with sinners.” In Matthew’s account Jesus tells this parable to His disciples. In Luke the sheep is lost. In Matthew the sheep has wandered away. In Luke Jesus is teaching that God joyfully accepts sinners who are lost. In Matthew Jesus is teaching will not lose any of His children.

The reason for the two distinct usages is that Jesus used the same parable on two different occasions to communicate two different truths about God. On one occasion He wanted to communicate that God seeks sinners who are lost. On another occasion He wanted to communicate that God loves and care for those who are already His children and He will not let them wander away to their own destruction.

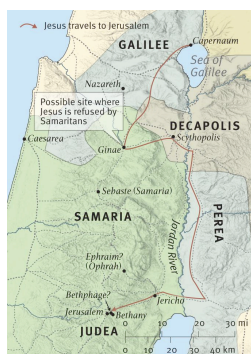
We covered the message that God seeks those who are lost in the Parable of the Two Lost Sons (a.k.a. the parable of the prodigal son). However, this parable has a slightly different focus. This parable has something to say to us in the church about how we are to relate to one another. This is the reason why I have chosen this parable.

## See That You Do Not Despise One of These Little Ones

### Matthew 18:10

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.”*

The opening sentence contains a warning. The first two words, **see that**, might also be translated, **take heed** (as in the KJV). This means, ‘listen up,’ or ‘pay attention.’ This is an attention getter! Jesus is saying, “You’d better make sure this does **not** happen among you!” Jesus was talking to His disciples, so He is saying in the context of the family of believers, this should never happen. This should get our attention also.



What is it that Jesus does not want to happen? He does not want any of **the little ones** to be despised. We naturally then ask, “**Who are the little ones?**” To answer this question we need go back a few verses and pick up the context of this passage.

### THE CONTEXT: On His Way to Jerusalem

Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem. He is traveling with His disciples. They are in Capernaum (17:24). He has just come down from the Mount of Transfiguration (17:1) and He has already warned the disciples twice that when He arrives in

Jerusalem He would be rejected by the rulers, killed, and then rise from the dead on the third day (16:21; 17:22). This takes place about two weeks before His triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

### Who Is the Greatest?

As they had journeyed to Capernaum (Mark 9:33-35) the disciples had gotten into an argument about who was the greatest. Jesus only took Peter, James, and John with Him up on the Mount of Transfiguration. **The other nine disciples had not been invited.** One wonders if those three were not convinced that they were the greatest disciples. In fact, it will only be a short while after this that James & John will request the seats on Jesus' right and left hand (Mark 10:35-41) which will not go over well with the other 10. In fact, the 10 will become very angry at the two for this request!

### He Called Over A Little Child

To answer their question about greatness, Jesus called a little child over to Himself and **He put the boy right in the middle** of all the disciples (18:1-2). Jesus then tells them,

#### Matthew 18:3-6

*“Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. 4 Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. 5 Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, 6 but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.”*

### The Audience: The Disciples of Jesus

So Jesus is speaking to his disciples. The audience then is those who are already believers (unlike the audience in Luke 15). *He is telling them that some things in their lives need to change or else they will not enter into the kingdom of heaven.* This is an amazing moment! Imagine sitting there watching this and hearing Jesus say these words. You're one of the twelve chosen disciples for goodness sake and Jesus has the nerve to say this? *Their desire for greatness was incompatible with God's kingdom and if they fail to turn their desires around, then they will miss heaven.* This is very serious!

He uses a little child as an example. He says *you must become like children in order to enter the kingdom of God.* He said, *“Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”* So something that particular child and what he did signified humility. I wonder what it was. What did the little boy do?

### The Center of Attention

Perhaps you've seen little children do something like this when they're put into the center of attention of adults. What will a little child often do? He shies away, doesn't he? He will often turn his face into the chest of whomever is holding him because he does not want to be the center of attention. Perhaps this is what happened.

It's as if Jesus said, “You need to be like this. Stop desiring to be seen by everyone and stop desiring to be the greatest. Instead, turn and be humble. Turn your face into your Father's chest. Stop caring if you are noticed by men. Remember that you are seen by God. Do not desire to please men. Yearn to please God.

### Children Have No Station or Authority

It could also be that Jesus chose this child because children have essentially no rank or authority in the eyes of adults. Adults do not go to children for advice and wisdom. Children are simply not

highly esteemed in the eyes of adults. Children are better seen than heard. We love children, but we don't go to children for wisdom and counsel.

### Who Are the Little Ones?

So who are the little ones? Are they literally children or does Jesus have a broader category in mind? In telling the disciples that they must become like children, He certainly does not mean that they must literally become children, but simply become *like* children.

In verse 5 Jesus referred to the **little ones** as those who **who believe in Me**. He said a watery drowning death was preferable to being the cause of leading one of **the little ones who believed in Him to sin**. He cannot be talking about really small children because really small children cannot fully understand who He truly is and believe in Him.

### Adult Believers With Child-Like Faith

So could Jesus have in mind adults who believe in Him, yet have a young and tender child-like faith. This fits the context better. This seems to better fit the context of the whole chapter. Jesus often referred to the disciples and all believers as children. We know we must be like children in order to enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt 18:3). Jesus praised God for revealing the secrets of heaven to the 72 disciples he had sent out preaching the gospel and He referred to them as little children.

#### Luke 10:21

*In that same hour he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, I thank you, "Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will."*

On the night before His death He called the disciples little children.

#### John 13:33

*Little children, yet a little while I am with you.*

After Jesus rose from the dead He called the disciples children. The distraught disciples had gone fishing and Jesus said,

#### John 21:5

*Children, did you catch anything?* (my translation)

**So it seems most likely that Jesus warning against harming the child-like faith of less mature believers.**

Jesus is speaking to His disciples. Even among the twelve some were more mature than others. We know much about Peter, James, and John and by comparison, we know very little about the other nine.

### The Weaker Nine?

If you were one of the less public nine, how would you feel listening to the proud arguments of the most vocal three as they boast that they are the greatest? I know how I'd feel. I'd feel unworthy to be counted among them. And I might even be tempted to think, "There's no way I do this. There's no way I can complete with Peter! He's too outgoing. He's too loud! He's too hot tempered." I might be tempted to shrink back and be seen and not heard.

Jesus' instruction is for His disciples. **This parable we've read falls in the context of teaching on how**

**fellow disciples are to relate to each other.** Since we are the disciples of Jesus, this parable this morning has relevance for us a church. It is instruction for all of us in how we are to relate to each other.

Now we can hear the words of Jesus.

**Matthew 18:10**

*See that you do not despise one of these little ones.*

Christian, see to it that you do not despise another Christian who has a more tender faith than yours. See to it that you do not hurt a fellow believer whose young faith is more fragile than your own.

The word translated ‘despise’ is the Greek *kataphroneo* (καταφρονέω) and literally it means “to think down upon.” It means “to feel contempt for someone or something because it is thought to be bad or without value—‘to despise, to scorn, to look down on.’”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus is saying to all His disciples, “See to it that this never, ever happens among you!” We ought not to look down upon a fellow Christian as though he or she was worthless. We should not think any less of a new believer than we should someone whose been walking with the Lord for 50 years. They both are in Christ by the grace of God, not by their own doing.

We do this a lot don’t we. We do look down upon one another in many ways. One of those ways is in how we exercise our liberty in Christ. This is also what the apostle Paul warns against in Romans 14. Paul describes the situation in Rome. There were those more mature believers who understood their freedom in Christ related to what to eat and what to drink. Yet those who were newer converts had a weaker faith and were offended by the liberties the others were taking. Paul says,

**Romans 14:3**

*Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats...*

There’s the word again, despise. Paul says Christian brothers and sisters are not to despise one another over differences of opinions. *And one person’s freedom is not to be the cause of another persons’s stumbling.*

**Romans 14:15**

*If your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.*

In other words, be careful not to grieve the heart of brother or sister in the Lord by what you do, *because* this is a brother or sister for whom Jesus laid down his life. How we lives our lives DOES affect the other Christians around us! The choices we make DO have an effect on our fellow Christians.

**Romans 14:7**

*For none of us lives to himself and none of us dies to himself.*

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<sup>1</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament : Based on Semantic Domains*, electronic ed. of the 2nd edition. (New York: United Bible societies, 1996).

We are all effected by what each of us does. We are united in one body and none of us should think so highly of our own freedoms that we would not be willing to give them up if we knew it would be a stumbling block to another fellow believer.

#### **Romans 14:21**

*It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble.*

So the little ones about whom Jesus is speaking are those fellow believers who have a weaker and more fragile faith. Jesus commands us not to despise, look down upon, our fellow Christians who have a more sensitive faith or maybe not yet fully mature.

#### **Angels in Heaven (18:10b)**

Jesus gives a reason for this. He says, “...*their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven*” (18:10b).

In other words, if you treat with contempt those tender ‘little ones’ who are the children of the heavenly Father, He will at once know about it. We know from Hebrews 1:14 that angels are the servants of children of God.

#### **Hebrews 1:14**

*Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?*

All who believe in Jesus are those **who are to inherit salvation**. God’s children are those who put their faith and trust in God’s only Son, Jesus. And the angels are sent out in service of all who His children. We know from Daniel (10:13; 11:21) that angels are assigned to nations. We also know from Rev (2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14) that certain angels are assigned to certain churches. We also learn here that there are certain angels charged with special care for those who faith is weak or immature.

This is not saying that there is one angel assigned to each and every believer. Gabriel appeared to both Daniel and Zechariah. When he appeared to Zechariah he said,

#### **Luke 1:19**

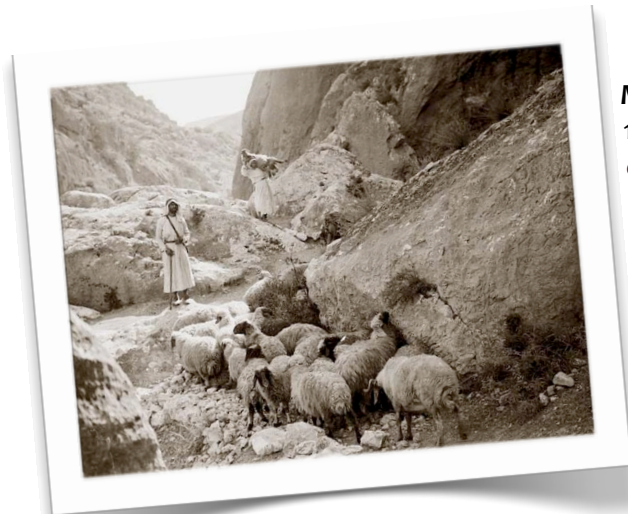
*“I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.”*

The point Jesus is making is this; God takes it personally when His children are looked down upon or ridiculed or belittled. Therefore, beware when God’s children are despised because the angelic forces of heaven stand ready to execute any command given by their loving heavenly Father. This is a stern warning.

We’d better be careful how we treat one another, because if we mistreat each other, we’re going to have angels at our door keeping us in line! This is should remain in our minds as we consider how we will deal with one another. As Matthew Henry said, “Let not earth despise those whom heaven respects.”<sup>2</sup> Jesus then moves on to an example of this fatherly love.

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible : Complete and Unabridged in One Volume* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996), Mt 18:7–14.



**Matthew 18:12**

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?*

The expected answer is yes! Of course he does. A good shepherd will go and find the sheep that has wandered away. Humanly speaking this can be quite frustrating, especially if this is a sheep that is prone to wander.

If you are alone, then you have to leave the flock and go out wandering all over creation just to find one sheep. When you consider the Middle Eastern terrain, that could be quite a task.

“A lost sheep will lie down helplessly and refuse to budge. The shepherd is forced to carry it over a long distance.”<sup>3</sup>

After wandering around and finding the sheep, you then have to carry it up out of the gully or ditch or hole that it may have fallen into in order to extract it. If any of you have carried a small child for any length of time, you know how heavy even a baby can get not to mention a mature sheep that can weigh from 90 or 200 lbs.

Sometimes they get stuck in thorn bushes and you have to carefully free it without getting your arms torn up. Yet this is what the shepherd will do. He will leave the flock and go after the wandering sheep. And look at his response when he finds it.

**Matthew 18:13**

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.*

He **rejoices** when he finds it. And this is no small joy. He rejoices over it more than over the 99 who stayed put and didn't wander. There's no hint of anger here. We don't have any harsh words such as, “That mangy sheep has wandered off again!!! I'm not going after that thing. He needs to learn his lesson.” No. There's nothing here but joy - joy at being reunited with the wandering sheep. This is quite a shepherd!

This is true isn't it? Have you ever been shopping and lose one of your kids? You may still have two with you but when you find the one who was lost, your celebrate more over finding the missing one than over the two who where always at your side. And so it is with this man in the parable. He rejoices over finding the sheep who went astray. He joyfully endured whatever hardship that was required to bring safely back to the flock.

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<sup>3</sup> Kenneth E. Bailey *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary – Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke* (Combined edition), (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), Kindle Electronic Edition: Locations 1,668-75.

## The Will Of My Father

### **Matthew 18:14**

*14 So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.*

Now Jesus comes to the point. He is teaching about God the heavenly Father.

Remember the mother I mentioned at the beginning. When she realizes one of her children is missing, does she continue to eat her dinner or does she go out and search until the missing daughter was found? She searches for the wandering daughter until she is found.

Remember the youth minister? Does he go on with lunch plans or does he stop everything and begin inquiring as to exactly who is missing and when the missing person was last seen. He does sit down to eat until that missing person is found.

Remember the family at the company picnic? Does everyone go on with the picnic while the little child wanders? No. Everyone stops what they are doing and searches until the child is found.

If we weak and sinful human parents and ministers know how to take care of and look after the physical well-being of our children and those in our care, then how much more does our Great God and heavenly Father know how to care for and protect the souls of His children.

### **2 Tim 2:19**

*But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: The Lord knows those who are his...*

The Lord God knows every one of His children. He knows each of them by name. God knows His children individually and He loves His children equally. God loves even the most insignificant of His children. He loves those of His children who are incredibly spiritually mature and He loves no less those who are less mature. He loves those who are incredibly gifted and He loves no less those who are less public and whose gifts are more easily overlooked.

Jesus called Peter, James, and John. But also called Andrew, Phillip, Bartholomew, Thomas, Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, Thaddaeus, Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot. Jesus said,

### **John 17:12**

*While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me. I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost except the son of destruction, that the Scripture might be fulfilled.*

It is the Father's will that none of His children be lost. Judas was never a believer in Jesus. Jesus said, "*Did I not choose you, the Twelve? And yet one of you is a devil?*" (John 6:70-71).

### **John 6:39-40**

*39 And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. 40 For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.*

If one His children begin to wander, He will come after you. But why would anyone want to be separated from a Father such as this? Our heavenly Father loves with an eternal, Son-sacrificing love even the weakest of believers. Our Jesus is such a Savior that...



**Isaiah 42:3**

*a bruised reed he will not break,  
and faintly burning wick he will not quench.*

This is the tender heart of our wonderful Savior. He gentle with those who are fragile and He will tenderly keep you.

**Isaiah 43:1**

*Fear not, for I have redeemed you  
I have called you by name,  
and you are mine.*

Oh, let us not look down upon those among us who easily overlooked.  
May we not despise those who have a tender, child-like faith.  
The angels of heaven watch over such as these.  
May we be careful not harm those with a weak faith, but may we nurture and love them.  
The Father in heaven will not let His children wander far. He will seek them out.

Won't you come to Him this morning?  
Won't you come to such a Savior as this?