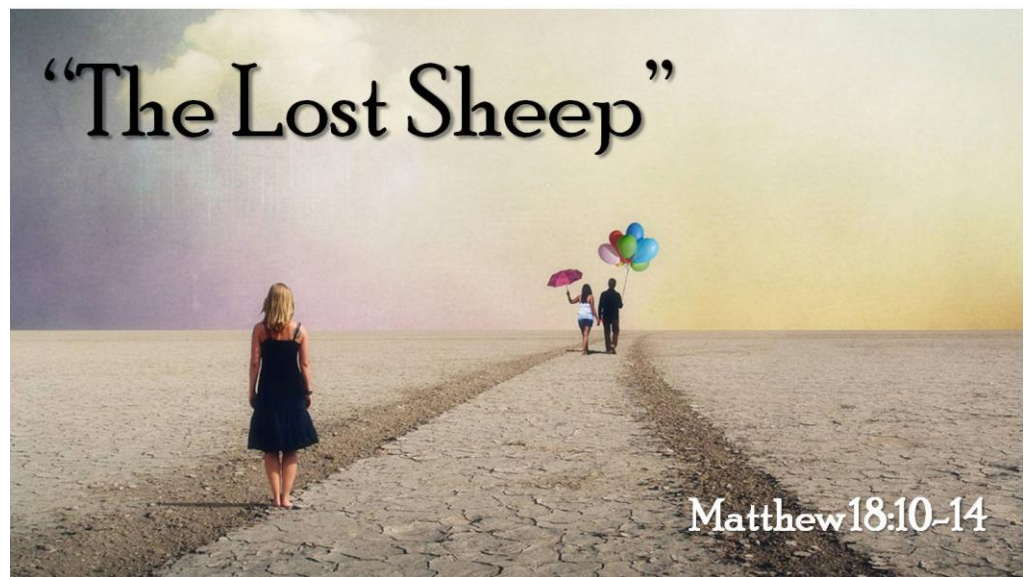


## “The Lost Sheep” – Matthew 18:10-14

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**Matthew 18:10-14** *“Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven. For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost. What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them goes astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine and go to the mountains to seek the one that is straying? And if he should find it, assuredly, I say to you, he rejoices more over that sheep than over the ninety-nine that did not go astray. “Even so it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.”*

This passage is of course quite well known and even known outside of the greater church. I have seen it used as a children’s story, a painting for the wall, and even a weapon against God’s children. The latter of course, by those who would seek to criticize the faithful for not giving, spending, bending, or sacrificing for them during a ‘rebellious period’ in their lives. So let us understand herein at the beginning of this message, to just whom this message is addressed, and what is being asked of us. In the context of the chapter, is Jesus saying to run after them or to not stand in their way of returning in any way?

For both this account as well as the account in Luke, strongly reflect the idea that the sheep in question are *lost*...not run away or actively ducking the shepherd! The “lost” herein spoken of, or even the idea of “gone astray” may indeed reflect an error on the part of this sheep, but not a knowing and purposeful break for the border. So if you have attempted to make a run for it, we will still love you and you are welcome home...like the prodigal son, any time you are sick of it out there. However, you know the way home, so suck it up, repent, and come home. Just ‘turn around’ and come back the way you departed. We’ll be here, and we will love you.

Now there has been a lot of insinuation over the years that sheep are dumb, and it is likely that such a debate will continue. Certainly the internet is full of jumpy defensive church folks that are quick to bristle and retaliate at any comparison or insinuation that they might have such attributes. No social media chatter from actual sheep however, so I guess they have thicker skin. Studies have shown that sheep remember the faces of other sheep over long periods of time, knew what plants to eat if they were sick, and were able to discern approaching bad weather and return home early. Shepherds in Great Britain discovered some sheep had taught themselves to lie down and roll over the cattle guards...8 feet...in order to get back up and raid the neighbor’s gardens! So ‘dumb’ would not be a righteous description I think, and maybe you could say that in some ways they even show some surprising intelligence, or at least conniving!

But we can’t truly leave sheep without a shepherd either, or your sheep are quite likely to end up dead. Why? Because they need **guidance**. They do not do well on their own, but thrive in flocks where they have strength in numbers. However, even that aspect can be a problem, for at times they will fail to lean on the ‘group dynamic’ and will just drift away, over a hill, and lose track of everyone else and be unable to find their way back.

There are reports of one sheep falling over a cliff and others following him over, so even when the group is together, there is not always safety. Even those that work with sheep will argue the greater issue, but I would say that sheep aren't as dumb as they are *dependant*. Because the one aspect that shows up in scripture and historically around the world, is that sheep *need a shepherd*.

Once again, our pride can get rankled because of the insinuation that we *need* anybody else to take care of us, which certainly reflects quite clearly on one's relationship with God, *thank you very much!* But invariably the picture is tied universally together: the *sheep* and the *shepherd*. I believe that is the *point*...the *picture*, that Jesus is trying to drive home here. The idea that the sheep and the shepherd are unquestionably and decidedly interconnected. Where there is healthy and vibrant sheep, you can be sure there is a watchful shepherd.

Now, some of us are old enough to remember or perhaps curious enough to have looked into this old church 'wind of doctrine' that was dubbed the "shepherding movement." This little program didn't fare so well, and left a bad taste in a lot of people's mouths, especially concerning leadership and authority in the church. I won't detail this thing, but to say that it affectively involved a person or small group of people dictating control over another in fairly all-encompassing ways, and in ways that had nothing to do with spirituality or spiritual growth.

In light of that oft 'knee-jerk' I would like to clarify herein and state for the record that despite the sometimes loose use of the word, I am not the shepherd here, but at best I am an "under-shepherd." In truth I consider myself rather the "sheep-dog." Meaning my job is not to run the show, but rather to run around keeping the herd together, defending the sheep from predators, and doing what the shepherd tells me to do. *And* I need to mention, as the sheepdog I am as dependent upon and ruled by the shepherd as much as the sheep are! So don't take out your "shepherd frustration" out upon the sheepdog if you please. After all, I'm just doing my job!

Let's set the stage. Jesus here in this account, speaks concerning the sheep and the shepherd. No under-shepherd mentioned, nor is there a sheepdog on stage. Just the shepherd/owner and the sheep. That is critical for those who get all bent out of shape when they leave the church in a fit and then vent on public media when no one comes looking for them. Because please note: *the other sheep didn't gather a posse' and go looking for the rebellious or lost sheep*. And further more, if **I** am not **THE** shepherd, then don't get angry when I fail to come looking. What does the story say? It says the *shepherd/owner* goes looking for that lost sheep. See we are so apt to receive this account as *instructive* rather than deeply and spiritually *informative!* The story is telling us that **Jesus** will indeed go looking for **His** sheep!

But let us wrap our hands around a couple of the nuances of this account. *One*, the language once again says that the shepherd went looking for the lost *sheep*. So firstly, one must figure out if the lost soul in question is *actually a sheep* or maybe it's in fact something very different. The Bible speaks of *wolves* amongst the sheep for one thing. And I have previously shared my intrigue with the llama that lives on a farm on my trip home each day. I have questioned if he actually knows he is a llama because there is no other llama's there to provide a point of reference. I have often seen llama's with sheep also, and again the question arises. Does he think he is a sheep because he lives with other sheep? I mean, the *sheep* know he's not a sheep, but they're not talking and frankly they speak different languages...just like the redeemed and un-redeemed in the physical realm of the church.

The fact is, a lot of folks think that because they hang around with other Christians that they themselves are a Christian because of such. But salvation isn't achieved through osmosis. Proximity means nothing. Until you are "reborn," you are not a sheep, and Jesus is not your shepherd. So maybe the reason you feel no one is coming for you is because you aren't a sheep and you are therefore not of this sheepfold.

Now please don't feel that such a statement is in anyway putting you out in the cold! You are always and forever welcome here to hang out with us. But I would not be doing you any favors if I pretended you were anything other than what you are. REAL love embodies real truth!

I know...such is so strange and rare today we hardly know how to act when in the presence of truth. But Jesus never lied to anyone. He was gentle and loving and patient. But He was no liar. There is an old descriptive phrase that speaks of "chasing rabbits." The idea in its use, is that when I "chase a rabbit" I am like a coon dog...or in this case a sheep dog, that get's distracted and runs 'off course' because instead of doing what he is supposed to do and what he is trained to do, he is off uselessly and pointlessly 'chasing a rabbit.' I as a sheepdog would not be doing my job if I were off chasing a rabbit, or a llama, or any other animal that is not part of the flock.

Again, that does not mean I do not care for you, or that I reject evangelism or fail to be sympathetic to your life state, for I am speaking in the context of today's text. But I am not the shepherd, nor can I save you in any way. Frankly, we have so often got the wrong idea of what the church and its sheepdog is supposed to be doing...what their roll is in the grand scheme of things. We don't save anyone here. We here take care of each other in an earthly manner, share the 'food' with each other, and share life with one another. We can and should love each other greatly be we can't and don't "save" anyone! That job remains in the hands of one individual. Verse 11 tells us that the "*Son of Man has come to save that which was lost.*"

*Secondly*, the text says that the shepherd went looking for the **lost** sheep. So the next logical question would be "*are you really **lost**?*" What I mean is, much of the time what we are quick to describe as "lost" is quite frankly just rebellion on our part, again, like the prodigal son. Notice an important aspect of that story that greatly impacts *our* story today: *Dad did not going looking for the son.* Indeed he **was** a son, but his father did not go looking for him. Why? Because the boy...*and I do mean 'boy,'* was not "lost," he **ran away**.

That is an important distinction herein. If Dad *had* tried to chase him down, I think perhaps the story would have played out much different. In fact, dad could have made matters a whole lot worse than they already were, because little bobby wasn't in the mood for dad's intervention and had to play it all out before he realized the truth of what living in the world was like. He had to come to an end of himself before he could return home and once again receive the love and safety of dad's house. If God IS good, then the world is not, and so often one must discover that reality on his or her own. We feel for them...our love for them causes us pain, but some dances must be danced alone.

In the story of the Prodigal Son, we see Dad was overwhelmed with joy as he ran to meet the returning son. And that's important if you find yourself today 'out there' because of your own rebellion. Dad *wants* you to come home, and so do we. But you must **come home**. Dad will meet you with great joy, but you have to come home. It may humiliating and harder than anything you have ever done, but know this: *Dad loves you still and you are always welcome to come home.* He will run to meet you and rejoice in your return. There was no scolding and there will be no scolding here. We'll 'leave the light on for you!'

So, if the shepherd is the seeker, then do we have a part to play in all of this? We know when *not* to go looking for that individual, but is there a time we *do* we go looking? Well, if a person is genuinely a sheep and is actually lost...*and it happens folks, make no mistake*, then the game is on! "*All we like sheep have gone astray, each one has turned to his own way,*" (Isaiah 53:6).

What is OUR roll as sheep in the assisting of the care of the other sheep? Well, what do sheep do for each other? One practice is that sheep flock together for social interaction and safety from predators. It is ours to continue always to invite and encourage others to be a part of the corporate body of the church. That's why we are here. A sheep knows that there is safety in numbers. They use their natural herding instinct to band together for safety. A sheep that is by itself is vulnerable to attack.

Secondly, sheep never walk a straight line. Sheep tracks are never straight. The winding of trails allows sheep to observe their backside first with one eye, then the other. Sheep can spot perceived forms of danger from 1,200 to 1,500 yards away, because they know that enemies are out there and that predators will take them out if they get a chance. So they are alert and watchful. Not just for themselves, but for the flock as a whole. Sheep have keen senses. They are very sensitive to what different predators smell like. They know the difference between friend and foe, and they don't keep that information to themselves.

If a sheep is introduced to the group, they are part of the group and included in all measures of safety and health. Because sheep are a very social animal, in a grazing situation, they need to see other sheep. Out of sight means danger to them. So it is ours to remain "in sight" of the other sheep always. We must not forget the one who has drifted off, trying always to "stay in sight" of them so they know where the safety is.

A sheep will become highly agitated if it is separated from the rest of the flock. We must watch for that agitation and make our presence known and our whereabouts clear. If WE stay near the shepherd, then the lost sheep will know where the shepherd is. For it is in the church that the Father dwells. That does not mean He is not omnipresent, but scripture is quite clear that the church is His vehicle of choice. We are His body and His place of nurturing and relationship. This is where God is active and deeply communicative. So we help by staying near the Shepherd in this way and in this place, always provided a clear 'line of vision' to return to the fold of safety.

And while I am unable to know this for sure, I have no evidence of a 'corrective tribunal' being formed to scold the wayward sheep when he or she returns! I think we must always be welcoming and forgiving, without causing more pain for the individual than he or she has already endured. Luke's account says *"And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!'"* *"I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents, than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."*

So as we attempt to receive these words of Christ and make them a part of our living as we should do with every passage of scripture, let us firstly remember who we are and *who we are not*. We are not the shepherd, but rather we are simply more of His sheep. We must love and care for the other sheep as brothers and sisters, but never forget they are *HIS* sons and daughters...they are *HIS* sheep, not ours. He is God and has abilities we do not have. Abilities to see a clarity of truth and timing that we are not. He has a unique ability to find His sheep when we cannot! Prayer for others is always a powerful participation in the ministry to others, to both the unsaved and the wayward redeemed! Ours is to love always, but let us not get in the way of the work of the shepherd! Our best is to point the way home and to stand in the gate to hold the door open!