

The Parables of the Shepherd and the Sheep

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One of our Lord's best-known parables is the parable of the Shepherd and the Sheep. You all know the basic outline: a shepherd has 100 sheep, one of them goes missing, he leaves the other 99 and goes off to find the missing one.

This is in fact not one parable, but two. The Lord told such a story on two separate occasions,¹ to two different audiences, with subtle differences that show he is talking about two very different ministries in the local church. We should not be surprised that someone who spoke as often as our Lord did would repeat common themes and images, and we should pay attention to see how he may use these themes differently in different places.

- In Luke, the shepherd is the evangelist, reaching out to a lost sinner and bringing him to his heavenly home.
- In Matthew, the shepherd is the pastor, gently restoring an immature believer who has fallen into sin.²

Luke 15:1-7, The Shepherd as Evangelist

The setting of this parable is as the Lord makes his way to Jerusalem to offer himself up at Passover. Along the way, he continues to preach and teach, and this is one such public episode.

Luk 15:1 Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him. 2 And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.--Two groups of people heard this parable. The publicans and sinners knew they were alienated from God. The Pharisees and scribes thought they were righteous. The sinners come eagerly to hear him, and respond to his teaching with repentance. The Pharisees criticize him for defiling himself with such rabble. Watch for references to these two groups.

3 And he spake this parable unto them, saying, 4 What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness,--The wilderness is not the place to leave 99 sheep unprotected. Otherwise you'll come back to find most of them gone.

But the reference makes sense if the 99 are the Pharisees and scribes. They don't recognize it, but they are in the wilderness. The purpose of the parable is to explain why he is spending time with the publicans and sinners, rather than associating with "proper people."

The evangelist should not waste his time with the self-righteous, but seek those who are sinners and who know it, those in whose hearts the HS has begun to work repentance.

and go after that which is lost, until he find it?--The NT regularly uses "lost" ἀπολλυμι as the

¹ See notes for discussion of the chronology.

² These two ministries are central in the local church (being the two distinguished in Eph 4:11).

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opposite of “saved.” It describes those who are alienated from God and who have no place in the kingdom of God. The epistles frequently use it to speak of the condition of the unsaved (chart):

Rom. 2:12 For as many as have sinned without law shall also **perish** without law: and as many as have sinned in the law shall be judged by the law;

1 Cor. 1:18 For the preaching of the cross is to them that **perish** foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.

2 Cor. 2:15 For we are unto God a sweet savour of Christ, in them that are saved, and in them that **perish**:

2 Cor. 4:3 But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are **lost**:

Our objective in evangelism is not making happy people even happier, but delivering from death those who are ready to perish. Until a person has felt the hot breath of hell on his neck, he will not turn to the Lord. We must preach God’s wrath if we would bring people to true salvation.

5 And when he hath found it,--There are two things to note about this description of salvation.

The first is that the sheep is not seeking the Lord. The Lord is seeking the sheep. Indeed, we do speak of seeking the Lord, but our Savior taught,

Joh 6:44 No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day.

The second observation is that in this parable, there is no question that the Savior finds the sheep. Certainly, in our evangelistic outreach, many reject the message that we offer, as the Pharisees rejected the Lord’s public message. But when the Son of God focuses his attention on an individual, he finds him.

Joh 6:39 And this is the Father's will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day.

This should be a great comfort to us in our outreach. The Lord will find his own, whatever setbacks we encounter along the way.

he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing.--How great is the Lord’s love for the flock that the Father has given him! He rejoices when a sinner repents and turns to him.

6 And when he cometh home,--Nothing more is said of the 99 who were left in the wilderness. They are still there. He returns, not to them, but “home.”

he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost. 7 I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance.--Where could one find 99 people who do not need repentance? The Lord’s statement is a bit sarcastic, in the same vein as what he said on another occasion,

Mat 9:11 And when the Pharisees saw it, they said unto his disciples, Why eateth your

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Master with publicans and sinners? 12 But when Jesus heard *that*, he said unto them, **They that be whole** need not a physician, but they that are sick. 13 But go ye and learn what *that* meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for **I am not come to call the righteous**, but sinners to repentance.

Spiritually, no one is whole, without need for a physician. No one is righteous, without need for the Redeemer. All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God. In the same way, there is nobody who “needs no repentance.” But there are many people who think they are whole, righteous, and without need of repentance, and the Lord has not come to them.

How patiently and skillfully the divine Shepherd seeks his flock. He focuses on those who know they are lost, seeks them out, and gently leads them to himself. May he give us skill in our evangelistic work to discern the hearts of men and women, boys and girls, and focus our attention on those who know they are lost and in whose hearts the Spirit is working. And may he give us confidence that when he leads us to such a lost sheep, we will certainly find it.

Matt 18:10-14

This delivery of the parable probably happened before that in Luke. The Lord is in Capernaum, before setting out for Jerusalem.

This is the fourth of the Lord’s five great discourses in Matthew, the one that describes life in the church. It begins with the disciples’ question about who is the greatest in the kingdom, and the Lord replies with the illustration of a child, echoing John 3:3,

Mat 18:3 And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as **little children**, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. 4 Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this **little child**, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

Throughout the chapter, the “little children” are the believers (v. 6). The rest of the chapter tells how this community of little ones are to live together. He instructs them in two areas: not giving offense to others (vv. 5-14), and how to deal with offense when you are on the receiving end (vv. 15-35). In each case, he first sets forth the principle, then illustrates it with a parable.

The second parable of the shepherd is his illustration of not giving offense to the little ones. Note the differences with Luke (Table 1).

- Matthew 18 is addressed privately to the disciples; Luke 15 is addressed publicly to a mixed group of publicans, sinners, scribes, and Pharisees.
- Here, the flock is the “little ones,” who are presumed to be in the kingdom. In Luke 15, it consists of interested sinners and antagonistic religious leaders.
- We are assured that not one of the little ones will perish, but there is no such assurance in Luke 15.
- The sheep here has gone “astray,” but in Luke 15, it is “lost,” the very state that 18:14

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assures us will not happen to a little one.

- The 99 are characterized differently. Here they “went not astray”; in Luke 15, they “need no repentance.”
- In Luke, he leaves the 99 “in the wilderness.” The reference to the mountains in Matthew is ambiguous, but allows the interpretation of the AV, that it is where he went to seek the wayward sheep, not where he left the flock (which would ordinarily be in their fold).
- When he finds the wayward sheep, in Luke, he returns not to the others, but “home.”
- Finally, in Luke, it is assumed that he finds the sheep, but in Matthew that outcome is in doubt.

The two parables describe different ministries. Luke describes the *evangelist*. The flock is the mass of humanity, self-righteous but in the wilderness, and he pursues one who is clearly lost, bringing it back, not to the wayward flock, but to his heavenly home. Matthew describes

the *pastor*, confronted with a flock of little ones who have professed faith but in whom the Holy Spirit has not yet produced the promised “righteousness of the law” (Rom 8:4). One may “go astray,” and the shepherd must seek it in the mountains where it has strayed. The outcome is not certain. But if the wayward sheep is restored to the flock, there is great rejoicing.

The parable in Matthew is a chiasm (Table 2, chart).³ Some chiasms have an even number of

	Matthew 18	Luke 15
Audience	1 At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus	1 Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him. 2 And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them.
Population under discussion	Little ones ... those in the kingdom	Publicans, sinners, scribes, Pharisees
Father's motive	14 Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish [be lost]	(not stated)
State of the wandering sheep	Astray v. 12	Lost v. 4
State of the 99	13 went not astray	7 need no repentance
Role of the wilderness	12 he ... goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray	4 leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness
Where he brings the sheep	Not stated	6 and when he cometh home, he calleth together <i>his</i> friends and neighbours,
Certainty of the outcome	13 If so be that he find it...	5 When he hath found it...

Table 1: Two parables of the wayward sheep

³ The analysis follows John Nolland, *NIGTC on Matthew*, p. 740, who in turn builds on Gaechter, *Die literarische Kunst im Matthäus-Evangelium* (SBS 7. Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1965), 50-51.

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elements, the same in each panel, but this chiasm has an unbalanced center member, which in such cases is in focus. Let's work our way in from the edges to the center.

The Frame: 10-11, 14

Both vv. 10-11 and v. 14 remind us of the *people* in focus, the *Father* who watches over them, and his *motive*.

10 Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones ; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven . ¹¹ For the Son of man is come to save that which was lost .	14 Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven , that one of these little ones should perish [be lost] .
12 How think ye? if a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray ,	which went not astray .
doth he not leave the ninety and nine ,	than of the ninety and nine
and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh ζητεω that which is gone astray? 13 And if so be that he find it, verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth more of that <i>sheep</i> ,	

Table 2: Chiastic structure of the wandering little one

The *subject* of the parable is the “little ones” or “little children” who are in focus throughout Matthew 18. The reference is not to physical age, but to those who have been born again. They form the flock from which one wanders away.

It is all too easy for us to fall into the error of the Pharisees, and look down our noses self-righteously at the “little ones,” those who are immature and struggling with the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life. This is exactly the wrong attitude for us to have, for the frame also emphasizes the interest taken in the entire process by the *Father who is in heaven*. The matter of little ones who go astray is not just a bookkeeping detail for the church secretary. It is of deep concern to the heavenly Father. If it is not our Father's will that one of the little ones should perish, we as his children should have that same attitude.

The third emphasis of the outer frame of the chiasm is on the state of being *lost*, which both our Lord and the Father are concerned to avoid. In Luke, the sheep was lost. Here, the little ones have already been saved from their lost condition, and it is the Father's will that they should never return to it. Those who are truly his “little ones,” whom the Lord Jesus has saved, will persevere, whatever difficulties they may encounter along the way.

Going Astray, 12a, 13c

In this parable, the difference between the 99 and the one is whether or not they have “gone astray.” Contrast the version in Luke, where the one is “lost” and the 99 “need no repentance” (v. 7). “Lost” and “gone astray” have very different implications.

We saw in Luke that “lost” refers to our eternal destiny. But the verb “go astray” *πλαναω* is commonly used of believers, particularly of immature ones. For example, James exhorts his readers, whom he calls “brethren,”

Jas. 1:16 Do not **err**, my beloved brethren.

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Jas. 5:19 Brethren, if any of you do **err** from the truth, and one convert him;

The early part of Matt 18 warns about giving offense, doing something that would lead an immature believer to fall into sin. “Going astray” can result from such offense. The sheep who has gone astray is a little one who has been offended. Our attitude toward offense should be that of the shepherd, willing to inconvenience ourselves in order to deliver a sheep from going astray, from falling into sin.

So the state of the one sheep in the two cases is very different. In Luke, the sheep is lost, unsaved, and the Lord rescues it. In Matthew, the sheep has gone astray, which is serious, but not inconsistent with being a believer, especially an immature one.

The Ninety and Nine, 12b, 13b

Who are these 99 whom the Lord leaves? In Luke, they were those who, at least in their own minds, “need no repentance,” the self-righteous who do not acknowledge their need for salvation. Here, the 99 simply “went not astray.” They are more mature believers who have learned to walk in the Spirit.

The Focus, 12c-13a

12 ...and goeth into the mountains,⁴--Contrast the role of the wilderness in Luke. There, he “leave[s] the ninety and nine in the wilderness” (v. 4). When the Lord finds the lost sheep, he brings it, not back to the flock in the wilderness, but home.

Here, we are not told where the shepherd leaves the flock, but we presume that it is in a safe location, and “the mountains,” the place of danger, is where the sheep has wandered astray.

and seeketh ζητεῖ that which is gone astray.--Retrieving a wayward sheep is not a straightforward process. You can’t lay down a twelve-point plan with milestones. It requires patience, diligence, attentiveness, but above all, a love for what one is seeking—otherwise the shepherd would give up.

13 And if so be that he find it,--At first glance, the contrast with Luke is surprising. There, the Lord assumes that the shepherd finds the sheep (v. 5 “when he hath found it”). Here, there is some doubt about the outcome.

When one whom we recognize as a brother goes astray, there are two possible cases. If the brother is a genuine believer, but just immature, the shepherd’s search will be successful, and he will return with the sheep. But the Lord has already warned his disciples of “false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves” (7:15). When

4 I follow the MT here, which omits the conjunction before πορευθεῖς, thus allowing ἐπὶ τὰ ὄρη to be associated with the following clause rather than the preceding one. Cf. E. F. F. Bishop, “The Parable of the Lost or Wandering Sheep. Mt 18:10–14; Luke 15:3–7,” *ATR* 44 (1962) 44–57, which argues that this association is the only one that makes sense. It also aligns better with the parable in Ezekiel 34 (v. 6), which identifies the mountains as the place where the sheep go astray.

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such a person falls into sin, there is no certainty that they will repent. John will later write of some who leave the assembly,

1Jo 2:19 They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would *no doubt* have continued with us: but *they went out*, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us.

verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth more of that *sheep*,--Rather than offending the little ones and carelessly pushing them into sin, we are to rejoice in their recovery from sin.

Summary

There are two central ministries in the local church: the pastor-teacher and the evangelist. Our Lord instructs both of them with the image of the shepherd.

The lesson for the evangelist is to focus on those who know they are lost. We are to preach to all, but when the self-righteous reveal their attitudes, we are to leave them in the wilderness, and focus on the lost. And we are not to lose heart, knowing that the Lord will draw his sheep to himself.

The lesson for the pastor is not to be discouraged when young believers stumble. They will often go astray. Instead of looking down at them, we must patiently pursue them and encourage them. But we must also recognize that not all who name the name of Christ are truly saved, and sometimes we will find ourselves dealing with a false professor. In this case, we must be willing to recognize that they went out from us, because they were not of us.

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Notes

Order of the Two Parables

The alignment of chronology between Matt-Mark, Luke, and John is problematic. The most conservative approach is taken by Edersheim (Book 4 ch. 4) and Robertson (note 10). The big idea is that Luke records three journeys to Jerusalem, and the first and second correspond to the Lord's participation at Tabernacles and the Dedication, recorded by John). The third (18:31) aligns with the third announcement in Matt and Mark.

Here's a table that aligns what we know:

	Matt	Mark	Luke	John
First Announcement	16:21	8:31	9:22	
Second Announcement	17:22 "while they abode in Galilee"	9:31	9:44	
Pastoral Shepherd	18:10-14			
Luke's first journey			9:51 sent messengers to Samaritans	ch. 7-10, Tabernacles
Luke's second journey			13:22 went thru cities & villages	10:22-42, withdrew to "wilderness" (Edersheim: by Sea of Galilee)
Evangelist Shepherd			15:1-7	
Leaving Galilee	19:1	10:1	17:11 went thru Samaria and Galilee ⁵	
Pharisees & divorce	19:3	10:2		
Blessing children	19:13	10:13	18:15	
Rich man	19:16	10:17	18:18	
Third Announcement "Behold we go up to J." Lk's 3 rd journey	20:18	10:33	18:31 asdfsdf	

I've inserted the two parables where they seem most likely to me, though in fact the lack of alignment between Matt 17:22 // Luke 9:44 and Matt 19:1 // Luke 17:11 makes precision impossible.

⁵ That is, from the wilderness (whence he withdrew after the Dedication), to Samaria and then back to Galilee to join his people for the Passover journey south.