

THE LOST SHEEP

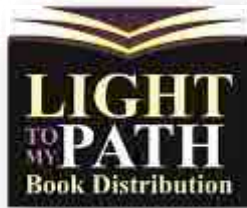


God's Heart for the Wanderer
A Study of Luke 15:3-7

F. WAYNE MAC LEOD

The Lost Sheep

A Study of Jesus' Parable in Luke 15:3-7



F. Wayne Mac Leod

LIGHT TO MY PATH BOOK DISTRIBUTION

Sydney Mines, Nova Scotia, CANADA

The Lost Sheep

Revised August 2015

Copyright © 2009 by F. Wayne Mac Leod

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission of the author.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise specified, are taken from the New International Version of the Bible (Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society. Used with permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers, All rights reserved.)

Special thanks to the proofreaders without whom this book would be much harder to read:

Diane Mac Leod, Lillian Mac Neil

Table of Contents

Preface	1
1 The Shepherd's Responsibility	3
2 A Lost Sheep	9
3 Leaving the Ninety-Nine	21
4 Going After the Lost Sheep	27
5 And When He Finds It	33
6 Rejoice With Me	41
7 Rejoicing in Heaven	47

PREFACE

This is a study of Luke 15:3-7. While this passage is often used for evangelistic purposes, my purpose is to show how it applies to the believer.

The parable has become known as the Parable of the Lost Sheep. The word “lost” is a theological term often used in our day. As a theological term, it refers to an unbeliever who has never received the salvation of the Lord Jesus. We say that a person is lost if they have never come to Christ. I am *not* using the word “lost” in this sense.

I have met many believers who have wandered from the love and commitment they once knew. For some, life has been cruel and their faith has suffered as a result. For others, the church has been unkind and they find themselves wandering outside its fellowship. Others have fallen into the temptations of the world and their commitment to Christ has diminished. These believers have lost their way. They have wandered from the path God has for them. They are lost sheep.

As a good shepherd Jesus knew His sheep would suffer in this world. There are many enemies for the sheep. Their faith would be severely tested. Some of Christ's sheep

would be scattered. Others would be wounded and bruised and left by the roadside of life.

This is a parable about restoring the sheep that have lost their way and wandered from the joy and fellowship God desires for them. It presents a challenge to us to take seriously the care of our hurting and wounded brothers and sisters in the faith. In the day Jesus taught this parable, the Pharisees and religious leaders were neglecting the people under their care. The sheep were not being taught. They had no one to care for them. They wandered from the truth and fell into the ways of the world while their spiritual shepherds stood idly by.

In many ways the parable is about what it means to be a faithful shepherd of God's sheep. It reveals the heart of the Lord Jesus for His precious ones who have lost their way. It is a call to all who will listen to its teaching to hear God's heart for those whose fellowship and joy in Christ has been hindered. The ministry of restoring sheep to fellowship is not an easy one. It is one, however, that delights the heart of God. I am convinced that God's richest blessing rests on those who share His concern for the wandering sheep.

This is not a "how to" manual. I leave this to more capable shepherds. My purpose is simply to open up the parable and reveal the heart of God for the church of our day. It is my prayer that this brief study would reveal God's heart in a new and fresh way. May God be pleased to use it so that his wandering sheep may be restored and know the delight of His loving embrace.

F. Wayne MacLeod

1

THE SHEPHERD'S RESPONSIBILITY

Then Jesus told them this parable: "Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep... (Luke 15:3-4)

Luke 15:3-7 is not so much about a lost sheep as it is about a shepherd and what he does to find that sheep. In the context, Jesus is speaking to the religious leaders of his day. These leaders had accused Him of eating with sinners and tax collectors. To them, a religious leader had no right to defile Himself by associating with such people. Jesus responded to their objections by telling them this parable.

The parable has been typically used to encourage Christians to evangelise the unbeliever. There is no question that this is an important application of this passage. Let me point out a couple of details, however.

Notice first that the sheep Jesus speaks about were under the care of a shepherd. Speaking to the religious leaders of his day Jesus said, "suppose one of you has a hundred

sheep” (verse 4). This implies that the sheep he is speaking about are part of a fold and under the responsibility of a spiritual leader.

Second, consider what the Lord himself said about sheep in Matthew 25:31-33:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

Notice the difference in this passage between the sheep and the goats. The sheep are those who belong to the Shepherd, our Lord Jesus. The goats are unbelievers who have rejected Him. This implies that the sheep Jesus speaks about here in this parable are not necessarily unbelievers. They seem to be believers, under the care of a spiritual shepherd. They have, however, lost their way or wandered from the truth. In fact, the sinners Jesus was eating with when he was accused of associating with pagans and tax collectors were very likely Jews who were under the care of the religious leaders of the day but were being shunned and rejected because of their lifestyle.

Jesus begins the parable with the statement: “Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep.” He reminded the religious leaders of His day that they had been entrusted by God with the care of a select group of followers. These one hundred sheep were their responsibility. As shepherds, they had an obligation toward these sheep. This was an obligation they could not take lightly. Listen to what the

5 | The Shepherd's Responsibility

Lord God said to the shepherds of His people in Ezekiel 34:2-6:

Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them.'

The Lord God accused the spiritual leaders of Ezekiel's day of taking advantage of the sheep and using them for their own personal gain. These shepherds did not provide for the sheep. Because they did not receive the care they needed, the sheep were discouraged and scattered. Notice in Ezekiel 34:6 that though these sheep wandered dangerously far from the fold "no one searched or looked for them."

When God calls us to be shepherds, He calls us to an important ministry. It is not an easy ministry. The care of the sheep is a high calling. God will hold us accountable for each sheep He entrusts into our care. In fact, listen to what

Jesus says about those who cause one of His little ones to wander from the truth in Mark 9:42:

And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck.”

God expects shepherds to warn and protect His sheep from danger. He made it clear to the prophet Ezekiel that, if he did not warn those under his care of danger, their blood would be on his hands. He would be held responsible for whatever harm came to the individual he was supposed to warn. We read in Ezekiel 3:18:

When I say to a wicked man, ‘You will surely die,’ and you do not warn him or speak out to dissuade him from his evil ways in order to save his life, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood.

The religious leaders of Jesus’ day were not doing their job. God’s people were wandering and falling into sin. The spiritual leaders were more concerned about keeping their reputation and advancing their personal cause than caring for the sheep that had been entrusted to them. In fact, the context tells us that the Pharisees and religious leaders shunned and avoided the tax collector and sinner, feeling that it was beneath their dignity to associate with such people.

When Jesus speaks here about a shepherd who had one hundred sheep, He is speaking about a leader who has been given a tremendous God-given responsibility to care for, minister to, and provide for the sheep placed under his

7 | The Shepherd's Responsibility

responsibility. In a sense, each of us is a shepherd. God has placed men, women, boys and girls in our path and called us to care for them.

This parable is for spiritual shepherds but it is ultimately for anyone who has been given a charge and responsibility for another. Over the course of the next few chapters we will examine what the Lord Jesus teaches us about His heart and our responsibility toward a brother or sister who has wandered or lost their way.

For Consideration:

- Who are the shepherds in this parable? What is their obligation?
- Should we see the sheep here to be only unbelievers who have never accepted the Lord or does this parable also apply to believers who have lost their way? Explain.
- Consider the community where you live. Are there believers who have fallen away from fellowship? What ministry does your church have toward those who have wandered from the truth or become discouraged in their Christian walk?
- Has God given you responsibility for someone? Who are the people God has called you to care for and nurture? Have you been faithful to that obligation?

For Prayer:

- Do you know someone who has wandered from the truth or become discouraged in his or her Christian walk? Take a moment to pray for them.
- Ask God to show you the people He has placed under your responsibility. Ask Him to help you to be faithful in caring for them. Ask Him to show you what you can do to minister to them in their time of need.
- Take a moment to pray for the spiritual shepherds of your church. Ask God to give them grace to care for the flock He has entrusted to them.

2

A L O S T S H E E P

“Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. (Luke 15:4)

Sheep are helpless by nature. They do not have the natural ability to defend themselves and they need someone to care for them. When Jesus looked over the crowd that followed Him one day, He compared it to helpless sheep without a shepherd. His heart was moved with compassion and He told His disciples to cry out to the Lord of the harvest to send workers to care for them:

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. (Matthew 9:36-38)

Sheep have many enemies. The spiritual shepherd must be aware of the temptations and testing that harass the sheep and cause them to wander. Let’s take a moment to

consider some of the ways true believers can stray from the path God has set out for them.

Theological Error

First, the sheep can wander theologically. They can stray from the truth of the Word of God into error. The Lord rebuked the church of Pergamum for falling prey to the false teaching of the Nicolaitans in Revelation 2:15-16:

Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

The apostle Paul rebuked the believers in Galatia for believing the false teachers who were promoting the observation of the Law of Moses as a means of salvation. Writing in Galatians 3:1-3 he said:

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?"

The Pharisees were highly respected leaders in their day. Yet, speaking to them in Matthew 23:15 Jesus said:

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a

single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are.

According to Jesus these Pharisees were hypocrites who were making converts into “sons of hell”. As a good shepherd, Jesus warned His disciples against the teaching of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law in Matthew 16:5-12. He did not want His disciples to fall prey to their error.

There is much false teaching around us today, as well. Even true believers can be deceived and fall into these doctrines. These theological enemies can cause the sheep to wander for years on a path that is contrary to God and His purpose for their lives. The faithful shepherd needs to be aware of the theological enemies that seek to distract the sheep, and do all he can to warn and protect them from these errors.

Sin

God’s children can not only wander theologically, but they can also fall into sin. Paul rebuked the Corinthian church because they did not take action against a man in their midst who was sleeping with his father’s wife (see 1 Corinthians 5:1). In 2 Timothy 4:10 we have the record of a man by the name of Demas who had abandoned Paul out of love for the things of this world. There are countless temptations in this world for the believer. The sheep are not immune to these temptations. Take a quick look at your church. Is there evidence of believers falling into sin? Our enemy Satan is cunning. The world and its ways look attractive and many sheep are led from the path of righteousness into sin and evil.

Fallen sheep are sometimes pushed aside by other sheep who no longer want to associate with them. Sometimes they are so ashamed of their failures that they don't feel they could ever return to the fold. Like lost sheep, they wander without fellowship, uncertain of whether God could forgive them or whether His people will ever accept them again.

Intimacy with God

The sheep can also wander from intimacy with God. The church of Ephesus is a clear example of this. Listen to the challenge of the Lord to this church in Revelation 2:4-5:

“(4) Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. (5) Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.”

The church in Ephesus was powerful in doctrine and testimony, but they were losing their love for Christ. The Lord rebuked them for this and told them that they needed to repent or He would remove their lampstand from its place. How easy it is to get caught up in the defence of the truth or the expansion of the kingdom of God. This is not bad in itself but if it takes the place of a personal relationship with God, we become guilty of idolatry. We can worship the truth and not the Truth Giver. We can love our service for the kingdom more than we love the King of that Kingdom.

Sometimes entire churches stray from their first love, replacing it with buildings, service, traditions and doctrines. The sheep in these churches have wandered far from God's purpose. Their busyness and defense of the truth

have actually kept them from Christ. They have lost the ability to rejoice and delight in God and have replaced it with service, truth and traditions. The Psalmist saw this in the people of his own day when he cried out to God in Psalm 85:6:

Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?

The loss of first love or the ability to rejoice and delight in God is a matter that all spiritual shepherds need to address. Those who have lost this ability have wandered into a legalistic faith that can never satisfy the soul. They need to be restored.

Relationships

Still other sheep wander and are lost because of relationships in the church. Paul pleaded with two ladies in the church of Philippi to work out their problems with each other. Writing in Philippians 4:2 he said:

I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord.

Who among us has not experienced differences of opinion with another believer in the church? How often have those differences caused division? Even believers fall prey to prejudice and favouritism in the church. The apostle James warned the church about favouritism, reminding them that it did not contribute to the harmony of the body of Christ. Listen to his warning in James 2:1-4:

My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. Suppose a man

comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," (4) have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

Consider the man who has been discriminated against in this church of James' day. If he came to church and was treated by the people as being less important than his brothers or sisters, how comfortable do you think he would feel? Would he want to return? Jesus was often criticized for befriending people of questionable character. The church of the New Testament struggled with cultural differences. We read in Acts 6:1 about how Grecian Jews were being overlooked in favour of the Hebraic Jews:

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

These differences can also be seen when Jesus visited the Samaritan woman at the well. We read in John 4:9 that the Jews would not associate with the Samaritans. The hatred between the Jews and the Samaritans was such that they could not live together. How often have the children of God wandered from God's purposes because of prejudice and bitterness toward believers of other denominations, cultures or social standing?

Sometimes the differences between believers can become so serious that fellowship is hindered. We read, for example in Acts 15:37-39 about the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas over John Mark.

Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company.

I have met believers who have wandered for years without a church family because of hurt they experienced in the church. They no longer felt welcome in the fold. These sheep are lost to the fellowship of the church because of broken relationships. Sometimes the hurts caused by other sheep are so deep it takes years to recover. The wise shepherd will be aware of this enemy and do all he can to maintain harmony and bind up the wounds experienced by these hurting sheep.

Trials and Testing

Another way the sheep can lose their way is through intense trials and testing. Sometimes it seems that the enemy comes with full force to destroy. The intensity of his attacks can shake true believers to a point where they lose perspective and focus. Sometimes they may even begin to question their faith. John the Baptist questioned the Lord Jesus when he was facing a great trial in his life. In Luke 7:20 we read that he even wondered if He was the Messiah:

When the men came to Jesus, they said, 'John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?'

A quick reading of the book of Job in the Old Testament shows that this man of God came to the point in his life where he cursed the day he was born. Listen to his comments in Job 3:11-14:

Why did I not perish at birth, and die as I came from the womb? Why were there knees to receive me and breasts that I might be nursed? For now I would be lying down in peace; I would be asleep and at rest with kings and counselors of the earth, who built for themselves places now lying in ruins.

The prophet Elijah, after a great testing on Mount Carmel, found a quiet place and cried out to God in 1 Kings 19:3-4:

Elijah was afraid and ran for his life. When he came to Beersheba in Judah, he left his servant there, while he himself went a day's journey into the desert. He came to a broom tree, sat down under it and prayed that he might die. 'I have had enough, LORD,' he said. 'Take my life; I am no better than my ancestors.'

This great man of God did not want to live any longer. He had enough. The weight of his trials seemed more than he could bear. He wanted to walk away from the call of God on his life and die.

These men felt the weight of trials and testing in their lives to the point where they questioned God's purposes for

their lives. They were like lost and helpless sheep ready to give up hope. How many believers are in this situation today? The enemy's attacks have been fierce. They have been left wounded, exposed and helpless. They are lost, questioning what has happened and wondering if they have a role in the advancing of the kingdom of God.

Neglect

Finally, it is possible for the sheep to become lost because of neglect. In Matthew 9:36-38 Jesus felt compassion on the crowd because it was like sheep without shepherds. There were many spiritual leaders in Israel in those days but they were not doing their jobs. They were not taking care of the sheep. The Pharisees shunned sinners and refused to associate with them. Their neglect of the sheep meant that many were wandering into false teaching and sinful lifestyles. These shepherds were not feeding, nurturing and caring for the sheep and the result was that many were lost and wandering aimlessly in sin.

We can be sure of one thing; our enemy is very busy seeking to destroy the work of God. His efforts are focused on the church and in particular the defenseless sheep. He will stop at nothing in his efforts to devour them. Many have fallen to his attacks.

I want to be clear here. We are not speaking about losing one's salvation. While our salvation is secure, the temptation for believers to wander into false teaching, sinful behaviour or even to feel shunned by the church is very real. God is concerned about these wandering and lost sheep. Jesus began this parable with the statement: "suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them." Do we recognize the believers in our midst who have lost

their way? Do we see their confusion? Do we feel their pain? Are we concerned about them? My prayer is that this commentary would not only open our eyes to see those who have lost their way, but also give us a better understanding of what we can do to minister to them in their need.

For Consideration:

- Can a believer wander into error or lose his or her way? How can true believers wander from the path God has set out for them? Give some examples.
- Have you ever felt like you had lost your way? What was the cause of this?
- Is it possible to become so involved in serving God and defending the truth that we lose our first love?
- Are there believers in your church who have lost their way? What would the Lord have you do to help them?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He never leaves or forsakes us, even when we fall or wander from the path.
- Ask the Lord for grace and strength to face your trials and temptations. Ask Him to draw you close to Himself in these times.
- Ask the Lord to help you to be more loving and compassionate toward those in your church who have lost their way. Ask Him to show you what you need to do to help them get back on their feet.

- Take a moment to pray for the spiritual shepherds of your church. Ask God to give them the ability to show compassion and care for the lost sheep.
- Ask God for discernment to recognize the many enemies that seek to destroy the sheep in our day.

3

LEAVING THE NINETY-NINE

“Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country ...” (Luke 15:4)

What is the most natural thing for the shepherd to do when one of the sheep in his fold wanders or is in danger? Listen to the words of Jesus in verse 4: “Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country?” Let’s take a moment to consider what Jesus is saying here.

Consider first the words: “does he not.” These words imply that it is only natural that when a sheep is lost, the faithful shepherd will drop what he is doing and search for that sheep. When a shepherd loses one of his sheep, it becomes his priority. The heart of the faithful shepherd breaks for this lost sheep. Its life and health is in danger. He will do everything in his power to protect and save it.

Notice also the words “leave the ninety-nine.” These words show us that sometimes the other sheep have to be put aside for a moment in order to care for the one that needs attention. We should not see this as a neglect of the ninety-

nine. If anything, the shepherd is also preserving their health by searching for this one lost sheep.

Imagine that you hit your finger with a hammer. Doesn't your whole body suffer because of that one finger? In 1 Corinthians 12:21-26 the apostle Paul makes it quite clear that this is how it is in the church:

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it."

God has placed every person in the body for a reason and when even the smallest member wanders, the whole church suffers. This means that the faithful shepherd will never underestimate the importance of even the weakest sheep of his fold. He will do everything in his power to restore the wanderer so that the church can become everything God intended it to be. If the body is to be healthy, priority must now be given to restoring the wanderer. The lost sheep must not be ignored or disowned. Every effort must be made to restore it. The health of the church depends on finding and restoring that one lost sheep to his place and role in the body of Christ.

It would be quite easy for the shepherd to focus on the ninety-nine healthy sheep. The ninety-nine are easier to work with than the one who has wandered. The ninety-nine do what they are supposed to do. They are often encouraging to work with and stand faithfully with the shepherd. For some shepherds, it just doesn't seem right to leave the ninety-nine to follow after one who has wandered and possibly doesn't even want to be part of the fold. The faithful shepherd, however, cannot imagine leaving even one sheep in enemy hands. His heart breaks for the wanderer. He will do all he can to minister to it and restore the sheep to the security of the fold.

Leaving the ninety-nine is not an easy task. It requires more effort to bring one wanderer back than to work with the ninety-nine who are quite comfortable and settled. In the world's eyes it is more glorious to be the pastor of ninety-nine faithful sheep than one wandering and rebellious sheep. Some shepherds are simply unwilling to leave the comfort of the fold to deal with the uncertainties and difficulties of searching for a lost sheep.

We need to understand here that leaving the ninety-nine did not mean ignoring them or leaving them unprotected. Shepherds in Bible times did not work alone. When the faithful shepherd leaves in search of the lost sheep, he is assured that they will be cared for by his co-workers. His helpers would watch the sheep in his absence.

Notice also that the shepherd leaves his sheep in the "open country" when he goes in search of the lost sheep. Leaving the ninety-nine in the open country does not imply putting them in danger. While there were dangers in the open country, it also offered some clear benefits. A shepherd could see an enemy approach in the open country

because there was nothing for it to hide behind. This gave the shepherd and the sheep an advantage. The second benefit to the open country was that it gave the sheep plenty of places to roam and graze for food. The sheep would be well protected and provided for in this open country. Before leaving in search of the lost sheep, the faithful shepherd makes sure that the ninety-nine are well provided for and secure.

While the ninety-nine are cared for in the open country, the priority of the faithful shepherd now turns to finding his lost sheep. The shepherd leaves the comfort of the fold to go into the unknown wild country to find it. In the next chapter we will examine some of the difficulties involved in searching for the lost sheep.

As we consider the words of verse 4, we need to ask ourselves some important questions. Do we share the heart of the shepherd for the one who has lost his or her way or are we putting all our effort into caring for the ninety-nine healthy sheep? What has been the response of your church to those who have wandered or lost their way? Do we see the value of the lost wanderer to the church? Do we understand that until he is restored, the church as a whole will suffer? Every sheep is important and contributes something to the well being of the fold. The faithful shepherd recognizes this and will do all he can to restore the lost sheep for the good of the whole flock. This sheep is now his priority. His heart breaks at the thought of it lying helpless, hurting and exposed to the enemy. May God give us such a heart for the wanderer today.

For Consideration:

- How has your church treated those who have wandered from the truth or fallen into sin?
- Are there believers in your community who have wandered? What would the Lord have you do for them?
- Why is it so important that we seek out and restore the wanderer? How important is finding that wanderer for the health of the church as a whole?
- Why is caring for the ninety-nine a more glorious task in the eyes of the world? What are the obstacles faced by those who focus on restoring those who have wandered?
- Does leaving the ninety-nine imply ignoring their needs? Why is it to the benefit of the ninety-nine that the wanderer be restored?
- Consider someone who has wandered from the fold. Why does the church need this individual? What gifts has the Lord given that person? How does the loss of that one person affect the church?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to open your eyes to the ways in which believers in your church have been wandering. Ask the Lord to give you a deeper burden for those who are sick and hurt among you.
- Take a moment to pray for someone who has wandered from the fold. Ask God to bless them and help them to be restored to fellowship with Him and His people.

- Thank the Lord that every single sheep is important to Him and thank Him that He does not give up on us when we fall or lose our way.
- Ask God to forgive you for not having His concern and compassion for those who are hurting and wandering in your midst.

4

GOING AFTER THE LOST SHEEP

Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? (Luke 15:4)

In the last chapter we saw the heart of the shepherd for the lost sheep. As we continue in verse 4, we see that, having made the lost sheep his priority, the shepherd now leaves the ninety-nine and goes after it until he finds it. We need to consider the words “go after” in this context. To go after implies several things.

While there is a time to pray for those who have wandered, the context implies that there is action involved in going after the sheep. The apostle James encouraged his readers to put their faith into action when it concerned a brother or sister who found themselves in need. He rebuked those who simply wished their brother well and sent him off without doing anything to help. Writing in James 2:15-17 he said:

Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

True compassion is much more than sympathy and talk. It involves action and sacrifice. The shepherd is not content to pray and hope that everything works out. He commits himself to do something. He is ready to make the sacrifices necessary to see that the sheep is restored.

Going after the lost sheep implies a willingness to get dirty. Jesus was accused of being a friend of sinners and tax-collectors. He ate with them and associated with them. The religious leaders of Jesus' day had real problems with this. In Mark 2:16 they questioned Jesus' disciples about why he associated with sinners.

When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the "sinners" and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: 'Why does he eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'?

These leaders were unwilling to "get dirty" by associating with those who were wandering from the faith. The reality of the matter, however, is that if we are going to reach the lost and wandering, we need to go where they are to find them. If we are afraid to be found talking to "sinners" how are we ever going to reach them? Jesus reached out to wanderers. He ate with them and associated with them. He did not participate in their sin, but He was not afraid to befriend and touch them.

The enemy would like nothing more than for us to be so afraid of the world that we refuse to go after the lost sheep. The religious leaders of Jesus' day were so afraid of damaging their reputation that they would watch the wandering sheep perish rather than touch them.

What would believers think if they saw you going into the home of the wanderer who was living in sin? Would they understand your desire to see him restored or would they feel you were compromising your faith? Going after the lost sheep may mean that people will associate us with sinners and tax-collectors. It means leaving the comfort and security of the fold to walk on the dusty and dirty roads of this world with the light of the Gospel. It may mean rejection and ridicule. It may mean losing our reputation and being misunderstood. There is a cost to pay for going after the lost sheep.

We have spoken about the cost to our reputation. This, however, is not the only cost. There is also the expenditure of time, resources and effort. The shepherd who goes after the lost sheep does not know how long it will take to find that sheep. Notice here, however, his commitment to search "until he finds it."

Anyone who has ministered to hurt and wandering believers knows that this is not something that takes place in a moment. Sometimes it takes years of hard ministry before the sheep is healed and restored. There are times when we feel like we are making progress and then the enemy attacks and strips us of the progress we have made.

There is also a deep emotional cost to pay to reach the wanderer. There are great discouragements in this minis-

try. We wonder if we will ever make any progress. Sometimes it seems that all our efforts are having no effect. The prophets of the Old Testament often felt this discouragement when wanderers refused to listen to them and rejected their messages. Listen to Jeremiah's lament and emotional pain at being rejected in his day as recorded in Jeremiah 15:15-18:

You understand, O LORD; remember me and care for me. Avenge me on my persecutors. You are long-suffering—do not take me away; think of how I suffer reproach for your sake. When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight, for I bear your name, O LORD God Almighty. I never sat in the company of revellers, never made merry with them; I sat alone because your hand was on me and you had filled me with indignation. Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable? Will you be to me like a deceptive brook, like a spring that fails?"

The shepherd that goes after the lost sheep will face the fury of the enemy as he seeks to rescue the sheep from its jaws. David knew the dangers a shepherd faced. Speaking to King Saul in 1 Samuel 17:34-35 he said:

But David said to Saul, "Your servant has been keeping his father's sheep. When a lion or a bear came and carried off a sheep from the flock, I went after it, struck it and rescued the sheep from its mouth. When it turned on me, I seized it by its hair, struck it and killed it."

When we go after the lost sheep we will sometimes have to face the full wrath and fury of the enemy who has carried

it off. The lion and the bear will not release their prey without a fight. The shepherd risks his own life to free the sheep from the jaws of lions and bears that have taken them from the fold. He so values the sheep that he will willingly give his own life to save it. Jesus tells us in John 10:14-15 that this is exactly what he did for us:

I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep.

Not all shepherds are ready to make this commitment to the sheep. Some demand that the sheep serve *their* purposes. This is not how Jesus served. If we are to follow Him, we must be willing to lay down our lives for the sheep. We are accountable to Him for their wellbeing.

Going after the lost sheep is costly. Those who take this ministry seriously are willing to lay down their reputation, resources, time and even their lives. Their devotion to the wanderer is such that they will give all they have to see him restored. Has this been your commitment as a shepherd? Is this the commitment of your church to the believers in your midst who have lost their way?

For Consideration:

- What is the cost involved in going after the wanderer?

- What risk is there in going after the lost sheep? What enemies will we have to face to rescue the wanderer?
- How does what we do as a church for the wanderer show the value we place on them? How much did the Lord Jesus value the lost and wandering sheep? What did He do to prove this? What is your church doing to prove their love for the wanderer?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you a greater compassion for the wanderers in your midst.
- Thank the Lord that He demonstrated His love for you when you were wandering from Him.
- Thank the Lord that He has given you grace to overcome the enemy.
- Ask the Lord to show you what you can do for the wanderers He has put on your path.
- Ask God to forgive you for a lack of compassion for the lost and wandering sheep you have met.

5

AND WHEN HE FINDS IT

And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders (Luke 15:5)

Notice in verse 5 the shepherd's response to finding his sheep. In this chapter I would like to examine the phrase, "he joyfully puts it on his shoulders."

When he found the lost sheep, the shepherd could have responded in a number of ways. He could have become angry. The sheep had been the cause of much hardship and expense for the shepherd. How easy it would be for the shepherd's first reaction to be one of punishing or scolding the sheep for its actions and the hardship it had caused him.

The shepherd could also blame and accuse the sheep. He could find fault and point out the sheep's errors. He could accuse him of being unspiritual, unfaithful or insensitive. Admittedly, these things may be true, but this is not the first response of the shepherd to finding his sheep.

Notice the shepherd's response in this parable. Jesus tells us that when he found the sheep he joyfully put it on his shoulders. His first response was to be joyful. What does the joy of the shepherd tell us about his attitude? It tells us that his concern was not for the hardships he had endured or even initially to defend truth or a godly lifestyle. While these things were important, the great concern of the shepherd was for his sheep. There would be time later for examining the situation and the reasons why the sheep wandered. For the moment, however, the focus is on the sheep.

Notice something else. The shepherd picks up the sheep and puts it on his shoulders. There are several things we need to see here. Notice first that the shepherd is not afraid to touch the wandering sheep. As we have mentioned many times, this was not the attitude of the religious leaders of Jesus' day. They refused to associate with the sinner. They would not touch them or be found in their presence. We see this clearly in Luke 7:36-39 when a "sinful" woman anointed Jesus' feet. Notice the response of the Pharisees to this woman touching Jesus:

Now one of the Pharisees invited Jesus to have dinner with him, so he went to the Pharisee's house and reclined at the table. When a woman who had lived a sinful life in that town learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume, and as she stood behind him at his feet weeping, she began to wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured perfume on them. When the Pharisee who had invited him saw this, he said to himself, "If this man were a prophet, he would

know who is touching him and what kind of woman she is—that she is a sinner.”

Jesus was not afraid to associate with sinners or be found in their presence. The shepherd in this passage literally picks up the sheep and puts it on his shoulders to carry it. He identifies with its weakness and reaches out to minister to it. He is not afraid to get dirty, nor is he afraid of what others might think about him picking up this wandering sheep.

As we consider this illustration, the question comes to mind: Why does the shepherd need to put the sheep on his shoulders? There may be several reasons for this.

First, the sheep has been weakened and may not have the strength necessary to return on its own. The faith of the wanderer had been attacked. The enemy has ravaged his mind and spirit. He lies by the roadside confused and helpless, not knowing what to do or even how to get back into fellowship.

Second, the lost sheep may be paralyzed with fear or embarrassment. Maybe he is uncertain as to the response of the other sheep in the fold if he returned. What do they think of him now that he has wandered? Will they accept him? Will they treat him differently? The embarrassment and shame is sometimes too great to return.

Third, the sheep may be hurt so badly, that returning is too painful. He may not be ready to deal with the rest of the sheep. This is especially true when the hurt that caused the sheep to wander came from other brothers or sisters. It is for this reason that the sheep may need special time

on the shepherd's shoulders away from the other sheep until he is healed and built up enough to return.

By placing the sheep on his shoulders, the shepherd is demonstrating care, concern and compassion. It is an act of love and devotion toward the sheep that has been lost. The shepherd draws the sheep close, tenderly carries him over the rough and rugged territory back to his rightful place in the family. If the sheep were a young child, the shepherd would gather it up in his arms. If he were a brother we would wrap his arm around his shoulders to support him as he limped his way back. In any case, it is an act of kindness, love and support.

What does this passage have to tell us about our responsibility toward a fellow believer who loses his or her way? How do we support and encourage a brother or sister? Let me make some practical suggestions here.

Embrace the Wanderer

When the shepherd picked up the sheep and put him on his shoulders, he embraced him and showed his acceptance and support. In a similar way, we need to provide an atmosphere of encouragement and friendship so that when the wanderer returns he or she will feel part of the fold. All too many people, wanting to get right with the Lord, return to the church only to be gossiped about, criticised, or shunned. Sometimes they are treated as being less than the other sheep because they have wandered. If the believer, who has lost his way, is to be restored, the church needs to be forgiving and understanding. While we should never accept sinful practices and doctrines, we certainly need to show patience and acceptance toward our broth-

ers and sisters who legitimately seek to be restored to fellowship. Remember here that in an act of love and tenderness, the shepherd picked up the sheep and joyfully put him on his shoulders. He sets an example for the rest of the fold. In a similar way, notice the response of the father in the story of the Prodigal Son. After wasting his inheritance and living a sinful lifestyle, the son returned home to his father.

So he got up and went to his father. 'But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate." (Luke 15:20-24)

The son does not return to an accusing and judgmental father. He returns home to a joyful father's warm embrace. This is the atmosphere we need to create for the lost sheep as he returns to the fold.

Bear their Burden

Notice also that when the shepherd picked up the sheep, he literally carried the full weight of that sheep on his shoulders. Imagine for a moment the burden this was for the shepherd as he returned over the rugged territory to the fold. On his back was a dirty and hurt sheep. Perhaps it

was bleeding and the blood was staining his robe. Have you ever had to carry a wanderer's burden? Have you ever sat down and listened to his or her hurt? The hurting wanderer sometimes needs to deal with anger and bitterness toward other sheep. Sometimes their wandering has caused pain for others. Carrying the wanderer on our shoulders means giving them a place to express their hurt and deal with it. It will mean helping them sort through their emotions and providing counsel and practical help so that they can be healed and restored in love to the fold.

Restore them to Fellowship and Service

When the shepherd picked up that lost sheep and put it on his shoulders he had a goal in mind. This sheep was going to be healed of his hurt, and restored to the family. He would have an important role again in the work of the kingdom. This was very clear in the mind of the shepherd.

Some time ago I had the privilege of speaking in a prison in the Philippines. This particular prison was a maximum security prison that housed the worst criminals in the country. God had been doing a wonderful work in that prison and hundreds of men were coming to know the Lord. In fact, God was calling some of them to be pastors to their fellow inmates. I had been asked to speak at a conference for 150 Christian workers. All of those who attended were inmates called of God to serve their fellow prisoners and minister to them in the name of Christ. I couldn't help but be amazed at the wonderful grace of God that would save such men and then call them to serve Him. I think of Paul who persecuted the church and then was called of God to be its number one ambassador. I think of David who fell into adultery, murder and deception and yet was called of God to be Israel's greatest king. I think of Peter who denied

our Lord three times and yet was called to preach the first great Christian sermon at Pentecost resulting in the salvation of three thousand souls.

There is hope for every sheep. God will not abandon the wanderer. He wants to see him restored to the fold and to a place of usefulness in his kingdom. The shepherd returns with his lost sheep on his shoulders with one purpose, to see it restored and useful again for the master's cause. Every sheep is important. Even those who have lost their way will never be abandoned. God's desire is to bring them back to the fold. May we catch this same vision for the lost sheep of our day.

For Consideration:

- What are some ways believers respond toward a sheep that has wandered from the fold?
- What does the joy of the shepherd at finding his sheep teach us about how the shepherd feels toward the sheep?
- What is the difference between defending doctrine and lifestyle and loving the sheep? Is it possible to defend these things and not love the sheep?
- What does carrying the sheep on the shoulders imply? Why does a lost sheep need to be carried for a time?
- What practical things can you do to help a wanderer to be restored to the fold?
- How does your church treat the wander who wants to be restored?

For Prayer:

- Ask God to give you the heart of Christ for those who have wandered from the truth.
- Ask God to show you what you can do to help a wanderer to be restored to fellowship.
- Take a moment to pray for a brother or sister who finds themselves in difficulty. Ask God to reveal Himself to them and restore them to health and usefulness in the body of Christ.
- Ask God to forgive you for any negative or critical words or actions that may have hindered one of His children from being completely restored to fellowship.

6

REJOICE WITH ME

Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, 'Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.' (Luke 15:6)

Finding the sheep is only part of the process of restoration. Sometimes the greatest obstacle to the wanderer is the other sheep in the fold. I have met many individuals who are not restored simply because they are uncertain of the response of the church to their return. The wise shepherd will be sensitive to this and do all he can to assure that the sheep is fully accepted by the rest of the fold.

Notice what happens when the shepherd returns. Verse 6 tells us that he called all his friends and neighbours together and asked them to rejoice with him because he had found his lost sheep. This verse is very important if we are to understand what it means to restore the sheep to the fold.

The question we need to ask ourselves here is this: Why does the shepherd call his friends and neighbours together? Let's consider some possible answers.

“Rejoice with Me”

The first reason comes from the phrase, “rejoice with me.” The shepherd is so excited about finding his sheep that he cannot keep the joy he experiences to himself. He is compelled to share it with his friends and neighbours. His desire is to celebrate the return of his lost sheep and he invites his neighbours to celebrate with him. This tells us something about the value the shepherd put on that single sheep.

Remember that this sheep had wandered from the fold. Maybe he fell into sin or false teaching. Maybe he caused damage to the fold. This type of sheep is often an embarrassment to the church. It is easier to simply let the sheep go and forget about it. The shepherd’s heart, however, was broken for his sheep. He longed to see it restored. He is overjoyed at its return. This was not the time for accusations and judgment. All too many sheep return only to suffer the wrath of the church. They are judged, blamed, harshly disciplined and gossiped about. This is not the attitude of the shepherd. He invited all his neighbours to a great celebration at the return of his beloved sheep.

When the wanderer returns he often feels embarrassed or ashamed. He feels unworthy of being part of the fold and is quite uncomfortable in the presence of the other “more holy” sheep. This appears to be the case of the prodigal son in Luke 15:21. Notice how he responds to the father’s loving acceptance:

The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’

Despite his unworthiness the father calls for the fatted calf to be killed to celebrate his son's return. What do you suppose the response of this father did for his son? Did it not reassure him of his affection and love? The father's joyous celebration proved to the son that he was loved. His sin and rebellion, as terrible as it was, did not strip him of the love of his father. When the shepherd returned and called his neighbours together, not only was he showing everyone his love and affection for the sheep, he was giving the sheep the assurance he needed to continue as a fully accepted member of his fold with all the privileges that held.

How easy it is when we have wandered and fallen into sin and rebellion to wonder how God could still love us. This passage should remove all doubt. There is great joy in heaven when a wanderer returns to the fold. Maybe people around you will condemn, judge and criticize you but the Lord himself is joyful. He celebrates your return in heaven. His arms are wide open to receive you. He embraces you with delight. Let this picture reassure you. Let this be an example for us in how to deal with the wanderer. God's desire is to forgive and forget. This is the clear teaching of Psalms 103:11-12

For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.

"I Have Found My Lost Sheep"

There is another possible reason why the shepherd called his neighbours to celebrate the return of the sheep. This can be found in the phrase, "I have found my lost sheep." The shepherd makes two things clear in this phrase. First,

that the lost sheep had been found and second, that the sheep was his.

This public declaration is very important for two reasons. First, it brings closure for the lost sheep. It is an official statement of pardon, acceptance and affirmation. We should not underestimate the importance of this public affirmation in the life of the individual members of our church. I remember a time when I was preaching at a church and a man in the congregation, not liking what I said, stormed out, slammed the door of the church and vowed that he would do all he could to keep me from ever preaching in that church again. When the leaders of the church heard this, they met together. The result was a letter of affirmation from the leaders to me assuring me that they supported my ministry and the words I had spoken. This letter was a tremendous encouragement to me and reassured me in my relationship with the church. When we are unsure of our relationship with the church we do not have freedom to minister or fellowship as we should. Wise shepherds will make sure that when the sheep has returned to the fold he is reassured of his full standing.

There is a second reason why it was important that the shepherd make this declaration. Not only was it important to the lost sheep but it was also important for the other sheep. The church needs to understand that the lost sheep has been restored. Restoration is not possible as long as the church still believes there are unresolved issues. By publicly declaring the lost sheep “found,” the shepherd is silencing any lies or gossip that might circulate about him. He is declaring the matter resolved and closes the book on it. This opens the door for renewed fellowship.

Searching for the lost sheep has cost the shepherd much but bringing it home is not a simple matter either. The church does not always accept the return of these lost sheep. The shepherd will have to deal with hurts caused by the wanderer to the sheep in the fold. Forgiveness will not always be easy. Confidence and trust will have to be restored. Declaring to the congregation that the sheep is found requires more than words. The wise shepherd will also need to create an atmosphere of acceptance and forgiveness for the wanderer to be restored. This will require dealing with those who are not ready to forgive. He will have to do his best to stop harmful talk, attitudes or actions that hinder full fellowship. Restoring the sheep means preparing the church to receive him back. The wise shepherd will do all he can to see that the sheep is accepted and embraced by the rest of the fold.

For Consideration:

- Compare the attitude of the shepherd here to the attitude of your church to the lost sheep that is restored. Does your church have the same attitude?
- Why is it important that the wanderer be reassured of our love and support? How do we find balance between affirmation and discipline?
- What is the responsibility of the shepherd in preparing the church to receive the wanderer? What obstacles does the shepherd have to deal with in this regard?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to remove any judgmental or critical spirit you might have toward a wanderer who wants to return to the church.
- Ask God to help you to be more compassionate and loving toward lost and wandering believers.
- Take a moment to pray that the Lord would help your church to be more accepting of the wanderer.
- Ask the Lord to help you to know what you can personally do for one of His lost sheep.

REJOICING IN HEAVEN

I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent. (Luke 15:7)

Jesus concludes this parable in verse 7 by saying that heaven rejoices more over the sinner who repents than over all the righteous people who do not need to repent. To understand what the Lord is saying here we need first to see what He feels toward His people. Consider for a moment what the prophet says about God's relationship with His people in Zephaniah 3:17:

The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing.

The Lord says several things through his servant here about the relationship He has with His people. Notice that He was their Saviour. He reached out to them when they were in need and rescued them. Notice also that He took

great delight in them, loved them and rejoiced over them with singing. God's people brought great joy to His heart. Though they were far from perfect, they still filled His heart with singing.

In the book of Isaiah, the Lord God compared His relationship with His children to a mother and her young child. We read in Isaiah 49:15-16:

Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you! See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are ever before me.

It would be easier for a mother to forget the nursing child on her breast than for the Lord to forget His children. The image here is one of tenderness and compassion. Who among us does not know the great joy a newborn baby brings to his or her mother? Notice also that the Lord has engraved His people on the palms of his hands. In other words, their names were always before Him. He would never forget them.

The Lord also compares His relationship with His people to that of a bridegroom and his new bride. Speaking in Isaiah 62:5 he says:

As a young man marries a maiden, so will your sons marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you.

Again the picture is one of tenderness, intimacy and deep delight.

God's tremendous love for His people will never change. It is an everlasting love. The prophet Jeremiah, reflecting on this, said in Jeremiah 31:3:

The LORD appeared to us in the past, saying: 'I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness.'

God's love for His people does not depend on whether we are good enough or live up to His standards. He loves us at our best and at our worst. Paul reminds us in Romans 5:7-8 that when we were at our worst Christ demonstrated His greatest act of love toward us.

Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Jesus Himself said, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13, NIV). Jesus did more than this, however, he laid down his life for us while we were His enemies.

Speaking to His disciples in John 14:1-3, Jesus said:

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

It is the desire of the Lord Jesus that we be with Him forever. There are people we can handle for a time. Only some people we would want to be with forever. Jesus' affection and love for us is such that He wants us to be forever in His presence. He will never grow tired of us. His love and delight in us will never fade.

What does this tell us about the love of God toward His people? He delights in them and loves them with greater love than any mother could have for her child. He rejoices in them more than any bridegroom could rejoice in his bride. He willingly and joyfully laid down His life in the deepest expression of devotion and love possible. His desire is to be forever with us in unhindered fellowship and intimacy. There could never be any deeper love than this.

The love of God for His people is a tremendous and powerful love. What Jesus tells us here in Luke 15:7, however, is that there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over all the others who do not need repentance. Let's consider this statement for a moment. Imagine that you could take every expression of joy and delight God experiences in you and pile it up somewhere. Now imagine that we did the same for all the ninety-nine righteous people spoken about in this parable. How high would that pile be? Now imagine taking that huge mountain of loving joy and dumping it on that one lost sheep. This is what Jesus is saying in this passage. This does not mean that God loves the righteous less. It does show us, however, the heart of God for the lost and wandering sheep. What does this mean for us practically?

If we want to rejoice the heart of God, then there is nothing that will bring him more joy than seeking the wandering sheep and restoring it to the fold. Too much of our time has

been spent ministering to the ninety-nine who do not need repentance. The heart of God is certainly for their growth and maturity, but God's heart breaks for those who have lost their way. If we are to minister to His heart, we will need to open our eyes to the needs of the lost sheep around us. He hears their cry for help. His heart breaks to see them abandoned and forgotten on the hillside. His heart breaks even more, however, to see how the shepherds have deafened their ears to these cries.

Listen to what Jesus tells us in Matthew 25:40:

I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.

The relationship of Jesus with His children is so close that when we speak evil or act unjustly toward or against even the least of His children, He takes it personally. He feels what they feel. Some of the harshest warnings in Scripture have to deal with the oppression or mistreatment of God's people. Consider what God said in Exodus 22:22-24:

Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless.

The punishment for taking advantage of a widow or orphan was death by the sword. God would hear the cry of His children and bring swift justice.

In the New Testament we have a similar warning. Listen to what the Lord Jesus says in Mark 9:42:

“And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck.

Speaking to the shepherds of Ezekiel’s day, who had taken advantage of the sheep, God says in Ezekiel 34:7-10:

Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, because my flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered and has become food for all the wild animals, and because my shepherds did not search for my flock but cared for themselves rather than for my flock, therefore, O shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them.’

God stands firmly to defend the cause of the lost sheep. He takes a stand against those who mistreat them and ignore their cries. Will you delight His heart by caring for the lost and wandering around you? Will you share His love and compassion for those who have lost their way?

If you are one of those wandering sheep you need to realize that Jesus feels your loneliness and hurt. He sees your confusion. You may not be ready to return to Him but He will not forsake you. He longs for intimacy with you. He patiently waits for you. He will not let you go. Listen to the

words of God to a rebellious nation in Hosea 2:5-7. Speaking of Israel as a wife, God says:

Their mother has been unfaithful and has conceived them in disgrace. She said, 'I will go after my lovers, who give me my food and my water, my wool and my linen, my oil and my drink.' Therefore I will block her path with thornbushes; I will wall her in so that she cannot find her way. She will chase after her lovers but not catch them; she will look for them but not find them. Then she will say, 'I will go back to my husband as at first, for then I was better off than now.'"

Israel was seeking after other lovers but God would not let her go. In Hosea 2:6 He told her that He would "block her path with thornbushes and wall her in so she cannot find her way." God would not give up on His people, even though she was openly rebellious. He would continue to pursue her until He had won her back.

If you are a "lost sheep" today, understand that God's love for you is such that nothing can snuff it out. He will pursue you. You may be running from Him with all your strength but if you will open your eyes you will see that He is still by your side. Surrender to this love. Open your heart to Him and let Him care for you.

My prayer for this brief study is two-fold. First that it would show us something of the heart of God for His children who have lost their way. If you are the lost sheep, be comforted in this. If you are among the ninety-nine, take note of His passion for even the least of His hurting sheep.

Second, I trust that this study will cause us to open our eyes to see the needy sheep around us who are crying out for help and support. May God be pleased through this study to cause each reader to see the importance of this ministry of caring for the lost sheep. May He be pleased as a result of this to see many reach out in compassion and love to His sheep that are hurt, lonely and wandering.

For Consideration:

- What does the Bible teach us about how God feels toward His children?
- What does God feel about the lost sheep? Does our sin and rebellion diminish God's love for us?
- Who are the lost sheep in your community? What more could be done to minister to them?
- We see from Matthew 25:40 that Jesus identifies with the least of His children. What does this tell us about the importance of our attitude toward those who have wandered for whatever reason?

For Prayer:

- Ask God to forgive you for any lack of compassion toward those who have wandered or lost their way.
- Take a moment to pray for someone who is hurting and in need of a shepherd to care for them.
- Ask God to give you a deeper burden for the lost sheep. Ask Him to open your eyes to see them and your ears to hear their cry.
- Thank God that His love for us remains even when we fall short of His standard and lose our way.

Light To My Path Book Distribution

Light To My Path Book Distribution (LTMP) is a book writing and distribution ministry reaching out to needy Christian workers in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Many Christian workers in developing countries do not have the resources necessary to obtain Bible training or purchase Bible study materials for their ministries and personal encouragement. F. Wayne MacLeod is a member of Action International Ministries and has been writing these books with a goal to distribute them freely or at cost price to needy pastors and Christian workers around the world.

To date tens of thousands of books are being used in preaching, teaching, evangelism and encouragement of local believers in over sixty countries. Books have now been translated into a number of languages. The goal is to make them available to as many believers as possible.

The ministry of LTMP is a faith based ministry and we trust the Lord for the resources necessary to distribute the books for the encouragement and strengthening of believers around the world. Would you pray that the Lord would open doors for the translation and further distribution of these books?

For more information about Light To My Path visit our website at <http://ltmp-homepage.blogspot.ca>