

July 8, 2018

“The Parable of the Lost Sheep”
Matthew 18:10-14

FCF: Lonely and disconnected

PROPOSITION: (magnet) The love of the Lord for His own is an astonishing thing.
(anchor) And He wants our hearts to be captured by this.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

News headline “Loneliness is an Epidemic with Physical Impact” (**READ quote**):

Researchers created a banal scenario: a group of people would play a frivolous game of catch, tossing the ball to one another to pass the time, trying to keep it aloft. But one member of the group would never have the ball tossed her way. Try to put yourself in her shoes: you're in a group that starts a game of catch; the ball popcorns randomly around the group; giggling and frivolity ensue; you keep waiting for your chance to join in the fun. But the ball never comes your way. You're patient at first. You smile when others smile. You inch a little further into the circle to try to draw attention. Your smile is becoming more forced now. Until eventually you conclude: the ball is never coming your way. This game isn't for you. You pretend you didn't want to play anyway. You stop trying.

The researchers discovered that the ostracized person will testify to an increased sense that life is meaningless and devoid of purpose. Now imagine this isn't an experiment but the shape of a life: instead of waiting for a ball to come your way in a silly game of catch, you're waiting for anyone to call or drop by or speak your name. You can't even express it, but you're hungering for some sign that you are known.

If the truth be told, a lot of us are feeling left out, hungering for some sign that we are known.

As part of the advancing kingdom of God, the church is to be a living demonstration of something quite different - an imbedded team on foreign soil. The world needs it. We all do.

SCRIPTURE READING: **Matthew 18:1-14** (vv.10-14)

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

In recognition of the World Cup, here's a soccer news story (**READ quote**):

Nothing can stop the world's most dedicated sports fan from supporting his beloved team. Ali Demirkaya, a soccer fan in Turkey who was banned from Denizli Atatürk stadium for unspecified reasons, has taken the only reasonable course to watch the game. He rented a crane. From high above just beyond the stadium limits, the diehard Denizlispor fan watched his team vanquish Gaziantepspor 5-0. He even led the crowd in a chant.

Nicknamed “Yamuk Ali” or “Irregular Ali” by the internet, the guy was suspended for a year, according to local news reports. But he just couldn't miss the game, so he decided to get on that crane quickly.

“That match was very important for our team,” he explained to Yeni Asir newspaper. “I had to go to the police station to sign a paper to show that I am not watching the match in the stadium. Then I quickly went to rent the crane.”

According to him, the stunt only cost him \$86. And from his vantage point, he was sitting pretty. The fact that he took the love for the game to such impressive heights has inevitably captured the internet's whimsy across the world. Eventually, his special VIP viewing party perch had to, like all great things, come to an end. Police lowered the crane.

Was it legal? Was it rational? What did he do to get banned for one year? Whatever the answer, the pictures are internet gold.

For Ali Demirkaya, devotion to his team shapes his decisions. His heart has been captured.

Now, soccer is a great sport. To understand it is to know why it is “the beautiful game” for the rest of the world. But here's the thing. It's just a game. The Lord wants our hearts to be captured by something greater, something that will last and stand the test - His love for His own.

What, after all, do we see in our text? The love of the Lord for His own is an astonishing thing. And He wants our hearts to be captured by this. He wants our hearts to be captured by His love. How is His love for us seen? In four ways. First, in His care for us. Second, in His seeking us. Third, in His rejoicing over us. And, fourth, in how His care for us is to play out.

I. HIS CARE FOR US - PART ONE

So, first, His love for us is seen in His care for us (**READ Matthew 18:10**).

A) *The Command*

There is a clear command here, one connected to of the larger context of vv.1-9.

1. The concern

His concern is for His “little ones” - not literal children but His followers, His humbled disciples.

2. The prohibition

And the prohibition is not to despise or look down on them. The idea being that the family into which we have been adopted is mixed and motley. So much so that we may be tempted to pride.

B) The Reason

Jesus absolutely forbids this. And the reason has to do with “their angels”.

1. Possibilities

What does that mean? Angels are God’s messengers and agents. They are moral, spiritual, intelligent, personal, powerful, and glorious creatures. In Daniel, we read of their representing nations. In Revelation, they represent churches. And here, they represent individual believers.

2. Certainty

To “see the face” is courtly language for access to the king. Three times in this text, we read of “each one”. So whatever all this means, their appointing is God’s care for His own, for each one.

The Lord wants us to know His care for us - not just corporately but individually.

Application:

Think with me. We are not just another number. He knows us, our very names. And He cares for us as individuals with care fitted to our needs. Just as a health coach, a personal trainer, a physical therapist would. Universal principals fitted, shaped, applied in a personal manner.

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II. HIS SEEKING US

But what about when we stray? That brings us to the second point, His seeking us.

A) The Shepherd’s Practice

Jesus uses an image they understood, that of a shepherd (**READ Matthew 18:10-12**).

1. His relation to the flock

This was an average size flock. And a shepherd in the ANE knew each sheep well - attentive to their needs and surely aware of their absence. Such was the shepherd’s relation to the flock.

2. His commitment to each

And his commitment to each was such that, when needed, he would leave the flock in the care of another, brave the elements and go into the wilderness to bring back the one that was lost.

B) The Father’s Passion

Such was a shepherd’s practice, a picture of the Father’s passion (**READ Matthew 18:14**).

1. An analogy drawn

Jesus draws an analogy between the Father and the shepherd, a rich Old Testament image.

2. The priority clear

And He is making the priority clear. For one of these to go astray (to be lost or deceived) is for them to perish (to be ruined or destroyed). And so He will surely search and seek them out.

Think of that. Such is His love for us that He would seek us in such ways.

Application:

It's worth considering, from a sheep's view, how they could go astray. "The shepherd isn't treating me well. I had expected more of him. He's not giving me what I want. He's taking me to places I'd rather not go. And the other sheep are just mean. So why should I stay?"

You see how this could work with us. And the Lord's assurance is that, whatever the cause, whatever it is that pushed, pulled, or moved us away from Him, He will move towards us.

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III. HIS REJOICING OVER US

But what about when we return? He rejoices over us (**READ Matthew 18:12-13**).

A) Not as We Would Expect

This is not at all what we might expect. I mentioned the perspective of the sheep.

1. Trouble caused

Let's go with the shepherd - the trouble caused, the inconvenience, embarrassment, and betrayal.

2. Scorn shown

For all the trouble caused we might expect some scorn to be shown - the rod upside the head.

Illustration:

Some of you know we have a German Shepherd named Lucy. We got her a few months ago from a rescue. She's a great dog but still needs some work. The "come" command is the big one. I have to tell you that, when she gets a little willful there, part of me wants to knock some sense into her when she finally obeys. Which would do what? Teach her not to come at all.

The Lord doesn't operate that way. He seeks us out and rejoices upon our return.

B) But as We Would Long For

It's not what we would expect. But it is exactly what we so deeply long for.

1. Different stories

Jesus used this same image for different purposes. This isn't the only time we read of lost sheep. In Luke 15, it's about evangelism, reaching one outside. But in Matthew 18, it's pastoral care.

2. Same response

The idea being that there are many ways one can be lost - utterly or partially. And the shepherd responds the same way to both. When that sheep is found, he rejoices over it with exuberance.

Such is His love for us that He rejoices over us when we are finally found.

Application:

That should be of immense relief to us. Whether we're talking about the lostness of Luke 15 or Matthew 18, God rejoices in our return. We have no need to hesitate. We can go to Him.

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IV. HIS CARE FOR US - PART TWO

Which brings us back full circle to the first point, His care for us. Here we need to take a step back and remember the context. Jesus is speaking here of the nature of this new community, the shape our relationships are to take. Put another way, how does He exercise His care for us?

A) The Principle

Here's the basic principle. He cares for His people through His people.

1. For His people

He cares for His people. Yes, somehow through angels. And His Spirit and oversight.

2. Through His people

But chiefly, He cares for His people through His people. That's the main thrust of this passage. You see, for all the great encouragement found in this text, there is great admonishment as well.

B) The Passage

1. The larger teaching

This idea tracks with the rest of the NT (**READ Matthew 7:12; 22:37-39**). What would that look like? (**READ Galatians 6:1-2; James 5:19-20**) The Lord cares for His people through His people.

2. The specific teaching

And that's exactly what we see in Matthew 18. Who we are in vv.1-9. How to care in vv.10-14. How that plays out with conflict in vv.15-20. And then a parable to press that home in vv.21-35.

The Lord cares for His people. But chiefly He cares for His people through His people.

Illustration:

"No man left behind" is a creed as old as warfare itself. The idea being there is a bond between soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines that cannot be severed. What that then calls for is a dedicated, organized, and trained combat search and rescue force to find and save the lost.

Application:

That's not just for our military. That's what Jesus has in mind here for all of us. We are responsible - all of us for each of us - to seek the lost God places in our path. That may be the utterly lost sheep of Luke 15. Or it may be the partially lost sheep of Matthew 18. Now, perhaps that's not how we see and feel this morning. And if so, we need to ask for new eyes and hearts.

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CONCLUSION:

But perhaps you're thinking, "But I don't want my heart to be captured by anything. I want to be free of all that. No limits. No restraints." Sounds very American, doesn't it? Like an Independence Day mantra. Aren't we free to be and do, think and say whatever we want?

That's what many hold. But is that even workable? Is that really what we want? I was at a gathering for the Fourth this past week and we were talking about firework shows of past years.

One person mentioned having driven down to Nashville and parked in a lot somewhere. “The traffic was insane,” she said. When the show was over, there were no rules, no directions. Everyone just did as they pleased, went where they wanted. And it was gridlock, a standstill.

Are we really free to do whatever we want and then able to flourish? Every great jazz player, before they could improvise and just go with it, had to take lessons from someone. Every great athlete, before they could perform that wondrous feat on the field or the court, had to do the drills and spend countless hours in practice. That’s how it is across the board, wherever we look.

For our hearts to be captured by the One who made us is not captivity. It is freedom. To know the love of the Lord for His own and then to be instruments of that love in the lives of each other - that is what we were created for. And there is nothing but freedom to be found there. The love of the Lord for His own is an astonishing thing. He wants our hearts to be captured by this.

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