

The Parable of the Lost Sheep



Matthew 18:10–14 and Luke 15:3–7

Setting the Scene

Jesus tells a story his first-century hearers would have recognized at once: a shepherd owns a hundred sheep and loses one. He leaves the ninety-nine, goes after the stray, and—when he finds it—lifts it onto his shoulders and comes home rejoicing. The picture is ordinary, almost homely. Yet Jesus sets that same action inside two different conversations: one warning the disciples not to despise “these little ones,” the other answering those who complained that he ate with sinners. The simple search becomes a window onto God: a Father who will not treat even one as expendable, and who measures heaven’s joy by the return of the wanderer rather than by the safety of those already found.

Context

In **Matthew 18**, the parable sits inside teaching on humility, stumbling blocks, and the community’s care for the vulnerable. Jesus has just set a child in the midst of the disciples and warned that causing “one of these little ones who believe in me” to stumble is a matter of millstones and drowning. He then says, “See that you do

not despise one of these little ones,” and immediately asks what a shepherd would do if one of a hundred sheep wandered. The “little ones” are not only children; they are any who are lowly, easily overlooked, or at risk of being written off by the community. The parable answers the question of whether God is willing that any of them should perish.

In **Luke 15**, the setting is controversy. Tax collectors and sinners are drawing near to hear Jesus; the Pharisees and scribes mutter, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.” Jesus answers with three parables of lost-and-found: sheep, coin, and sons. The lost sheep is the first movement in a crescendo that ends with a father running to a prodigal. Here the emphasis falls on the seeker’s initiative and on the disproportionate joy that follows repentance. Heaven’s celebration is not reserved for the ninety-nine who “need no repentance,” but is kindled by the one who turns.

The two versions are not identical. Matthew stresses the father’s unwillingness that any little one perish; Luke stresses the shepherd’s persistence “until he finds it” and the communal rejoicing that follows. **Together they present a God who both seeks and celebrates.**

Observations

First, the numbers matter. One out of a hundred is statistically small. A prudent owner might write it off as acceptable loss. Jesus assumes the opposite: the shepherd *will* leave the ninety-nine. The logic of the kingdom is not risk management; **it is the refusal to treat any person as expendable.**

Second, the sheep does not find its way home. In both tellings the initiative belongs to the shepherd. The lost one is found, lifted, carried. **Salvation is not self-rescue.** The image of the sheep on the shepherd’s shoulders (explicit in Luke) is one of costly, personal retrieval, not distant invitation.

Third, joy is the climax. The shepherd calls friends and neighbors: **“Rejoice with me.”** Jesus then interprets: there is more joy in heaven over **one sinner who repents** than over ninety-nine righteous who need no repentance. The Father’s gladness is not merely relief at the recovery of a loss; it is festal. Divine joy is tied to restoration.

Fourth, the parable judges the hearers. In Matthew it rebukes any impulse to despise the weak. In Luke it rebukes those who resent Jesus' table fellowship with the lost. The ninety-nine are not condemned, but their security is not the measure of heaven's delight. **The community that will not search**, or that will not rejoice when the lost is found, has misread the heart of God.

Fifth, the parable is Christological. The one who tells it is himself the shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine. The search is not an illustration of general benevolence; it is the pattern of the Incarnation and the Cross. **The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.**

Questions

- If God is unwilling that any little one perish, **what does that require of a church** that easily ranks people by usefulness, orthodoxy, or social respectability?
- Why does heaven's joy tilt so heavily toward the repentant sinner rather than the already righteous? **What does that reveal about the nature of divine love**—does it prefer the drama of return, or does it simply refuse to treat anyone as already "enough"?
- The shepherd leaves the ninety-nine "in the wilderness" or "on the hills." **Is that an invitation to trust**, or a warning that even the found remain vulnerable until the search is complete?
- How should the parable be heard by those who feel they *are* the lost sheep—wandering, unnoticed, or convinced they have wandered too far? And how should it be heard by those who identify with the ninety-nine and find the party for the one slightly offensive?
- Matthew and Luke place the same story in different frames. Which framing does a given community most need: the **warning** not to despise the little ones, or the **invitation** to join heaven's joy over sinners?
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Conclusion

The Parable of the Lost Sheep is not a sentimental picture of a kindly God who likes animals. It is a claim about the economy of the kingdom: no one is surplus. The Father's will is that none of the little ones perish; the Son's work is to go after the lost until he finds them; heaven's music is the sound of recovery. The ninety-nine are not abandoned, but they are not the measure of the story. The measure is the one who was gone and is now carried home, and the joy that refuses to stay private.

Those who hear the parable are asked to become like the shepherd—leaving comfort to search—and like the neighbors who are summoned to rejoice. To despise the little ones or to begrudge the party for the sinner is to stand outside the joy of God. The lost sheep is found because someone went looking. The essay ends where the parable points: not with a moral to be admired, but with a Shepherd who is still on the hills.

Additional references supporting conclusion.

God wills that none perish

Ezekiel 33:11; 1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9

The Son seeks the lost

Luke 19:10; John 10:11, 16; Matthew 9:36

God himself searches

Ezekiel 34:11–16; Isaiah 40:11; 1 Peter 2:25

Heaven rejoices over recovery

Luke 15:10; Zephaniah 3:17

The church must seek and welcome, not despise

James 5:19–20; Galatians 6:1; Luke 15:32

The Shepherd is still at work

Hebrews 13:20; John 10:16; Revelation 7:17

