

Who Then Is In The Kingdom Of Heaven?

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In Matthew 18, the disciples ask Jesus, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"

Thinking that He was about to set up a great temporal kingdom, they wanted to know who would hold the primary offices and posts of honor and profit. They were jumping the gun somewhat and had not yet received the Holy Spirit in full.

Mark informs us that they had disputed this subject while traveling (Mark 9:34). Jesus asks them what they had been arguing about. Luke adds that Jesus perceives their thoughts (Luke 9:47). The disciples, conscious that Jesus is aware of their dispute, are at first embarrassed into silence, but they eventually ask Him to decide it for them. What the disciples should have asked was: "Who, then, is in the kingdom of heaven?" Rather, they were too busy asking who was going to be in charge there.

Jesus' reply is found in the parables in Matthew 18:1-14.

Who Is Greatest?

Matthew 18:1-3 At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven."

Generally speaking, the word "converted" means to change or turn. Biblically, it means to change from one way of life or set of beliefs to another. It can also mean regeneration—a new spiritual life.

The disciples inadvertently exposed their ambitious attitudes. They had a lot of human nature, just like we do. Their minds were being opened here and there with the Holy Spirit but it had not yet been given to them fully. An attitude of ambition is wrong, and Jesus tells the disciples that they must change. If not, they will have no part in His Kingdom. To do this, they must be like small children who, for the most part, lack arrogance and pride. Children are characteristically humble and teachable.

According to Mark, Jesus teaches them that, "if anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all" (Mark 10:43-44). The humblest Christian will be the most distinguished. He who is willing to be esteemed last and least will be esteemed first.

Matthew 18:4-5 "Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me."

And then Jesus warns against offenses:

Matthew 18:6-7 "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of offenses! For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes!"

Christ regards injuring or causing a weak Christian to sin as a very serious offense. We are all human, so offenses will happen, but our Savior pronounces misery on the person who offends and causes others to sin. Anyone who leads others into sin bears great guilt. Only a deep-seated wickedness attempts to confuse and destroy another's potential.

Of course, Jesus' illustrations in the next two verses of cutting off a limb or plucking out an eye are not literal, but He wants us to understand the stakes. It is far better to attain to eternal life without enjoying the supposed pleasures of sin, than to enjoy them here in this life and be lost. So, Jesus emphasizes

that we must remove temptation and avoid sin at all costs. This is a major key to overcoming, and avoiding sin—nip it in the bud, right at the temptation.

Maybe we should feel sorry for the disciples! They were with true greatness while in the presence of Jesus Christ. He was great, as only God is great. They were not. They had not been born great. They had not achieved greatness. They had not had greatness thrust upon them. Yet they wanted so much to be great.

They were thinking of an earthly kingdom that would be established by Jesus, whom they now believed to be the Messiah, and they were wondering which of them would be the greatest when Christ's Kingdom came.

This question becomes the catalyst for a new direction in Jesus' private teaching of these men, which takes place in Matthew 18-20. This new direction has to do with what the citizens of the Kingdom should be like, the fourth of six collections of Jesus' teachings in the gospel.

Earlier collections included the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), the commissioning of the disciples (Matthew 10), and the seven parables of the Kingdom (Matthew 13). The others are in Matthew 23 and Matthew 24-25.

Matthew 18 is a collection of teachings gathered from talks given over the course of Jesus' ministry, more than likely as were the earlier collections.

The Disciples' Question

In some ways, the disciples' question was amazing. For one thing, Jesus had already taught about the type of people who would be citizens of His Kingdom: "the poor in spirit," "the meek," "the merciful," and so on (Matthew 5:3, 5, 7).

Even more amazing is the fact that almost immediately before this Jesus had explained that He would be betrayed and killed (Matthew 17:22-23).

Matthew says. "They were exceedingly sorrowful," but their grief did not last long. They were convinced Jesus was the Messiah, and the Messiah was

going to establish a glorious earthly kingdom. Therefore, they began to anticipate who would be greatest in that kingdom and to jockey for position.

The kind of kingdom they were thinking about becomes clear in Acts 1:6, where they ask Jesus, even after the resurrection, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” The verb “restore” shows that they were expecting a political and territorial kingdom; the noun “Israel” shows that they were expecting a national kingdom; and the adverbial clause “at this time” shows that they were expecting its immediate establishment.

They were wrong on all counts! The Kingdom was going to be a spiritual Kingdom of those who were saved from the guilt of sin through faith in Jesus. It was for all people, not just the people of Israel, and it was to develop over time, as God, through the preaching of the gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit, brought individuals to the faith. So, this was a long process at the beginning; they did not understand that; they were still thinking in a physical manner.

But those were concepts the disciples would need to learn later. In this chapter (Matthew 18), Jesus is concerned about teaching what the citizens of the Kingdom must be like, since at this point the minds of the disciples are still miles away from genuine Christianity.

Entering the Kingdom

What will the citizens of the Kingdom be like? They will be something like children, Jesus explains, as He calls a little child to Him and sets the child in the center of the group.

However, children have some characteristics that the people of God are not to copy. Children do not know very much; they lack the ability to focus on one thing for long periods of time; and they are foolish, and easily deceived. We are not to be childlike in those ways.

Children have positive characteristics too, such as open-mindedness and trust, though Jesus was not thinking of those here either. Jesus was thinking about humility, which He makes clear in

Matthew 18:4 "Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

He stresses humility because humility is the exact opposite of the disciples' greedy pride as found in their question above.

The child is a model, in this context, not of innocence, faith, or purity, but of humility and unconcern for social status, which we saw up here in the children's choir today. Jesus declared that adults are not naturally like that; they must *change* to become like little children.

The use of a child as an illustration is striking and is typical of the teaching devices Jesus used so often and so well. But it is the words that are important, more than the illustration, and the words are more than striking.

They are shocking, for two reasons. First, Jesus changed the nature of the question. The disciples had been asking about greatness in the kingdom they believed Jesus would establish. They assumed that greatness was all they had to worry about. They assumed they would be in the Kingdom. But instead of answering them only on that level, Jesus explains that unless they possessed a nature that was entirely different from what they were betraying by their question, they would not even enter the Kingdom. Forget about who was going to be most important, Jesus said. What they needed to worry about was being there at all!

This response is like the way Jesus answered people who asked Him why God allowed some apparently innocent people to be killed by Herod's soldiers, or others to be killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them. Jesus said they were asking the wrong question. They should not ask why others had suffered but why they themselves had not, since they were sinners. The question should have been, "Why am I not receiving the death penalty at this moment?"

Luke 13:1-5 There were present at that season some who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answered and said to them, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you

repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish."

He says this twice. Obviously, we have much to learn if we are to learn the ways of God.

Second, Jesus insisted on the disciples' conversion. To enter the Kingdom people must possess the humility of children, but to do so they need to be radically changed. People are not humble by nature. We are self-seeking, selfish, and driven by pride.

What do we need if we are to become humble, trusting what God has done for our salvation and not what we can accomplish for ourselves? We need to be converted from being corruptible to being incorruptible, which is God's work.

It is the greatest miracle that happens in a person's life. Yesterday we had two men baptized—the most important thing they have done so far in their lives. And the angels of heaven were singing at that moment! I think we underestimate the value of the miraculousness of our conversion. We need to be converted from being corruptible, to being incorruptible, which is God's work. We have our work to do. Without His Holy Spirit, we do not stand a chance.

I Peter 1:22-23 Since you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit [our responsibility] in sincere love of the brethren, love one another fervently with a pure heart, having been born again [literally, born from above], not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever.

How do we know if we are converted? If you are like me, you are constantly double checking, and asking yourself, "Am I really converted?" It is usually at the moment where Satan puts a little thought in your mind, and you begin to act upon it, but then you stop yourself, and you realize where it came from.

Major indications of true conversion are obedience to God's Word, love for the brethren, and humility. It is when we humble ourselves and trust that salvation only comes through Jesus Christ that see the process of conversion taking place in our life.

The Danger of Harming Others

In the first three verses of this section in Matthew 18, Jesus uses children as examples of humility which He demands of those who would be citizens of His Kingdom. But in the next two verses He seems to think of children, not in terms of their humility, but as those who are weak and helpless. He is not thinking of children literally, however. He is thinking of believers who, because they have become little children in their humility, have come to believe in Christ. So Jesus is concerned about and warns about harming a believing person spiritually. Those who are new in the church or weak in the faith or those who have strayed from the faith.

When Jesus speaks in verse 6 of "one of these little ones" He is not speaking of children literally although He does not exclude them. He is speaking of normal believers and He warns against placing harmful obstacles in a true believer's way. This should be a frightening matter for a person who thinks it is somehow fun to get a Christian to sin. (I have seen people in the world do that. As soon as they find out you are a Christian and you are trying to obey God, they try to get you to sin, often using alcohol, trying to get you to drink more than you should. Or by telling an off-color joke, or whatever it might be.)

When he succeeds in this he then feels vindicated. "If I've been able to get this Christian to sin, what I do must be alright or at least he's no better than I am." A person can feel good about such a thing. It is hard to believe but there are many people in the world who just want to tear things down and actually we are seeing that, especially on the Left today.

Jesus says that instead of feeling good it is better to be terrified. It is far better for him that a large millstone had been hung around his neck and he had been thrown into the sea and drowned, than that he should have lived long enough to harm a new or weak believer.

If you have ever mocked a Christian, tempted a Christian, or discouraged a Christian from serving Christ, you should tremble before these categorical statements by Jesus Christ. And sadly, I have known people in the church who have done this. Horribly ridiculed, made fun of, criticized other people, even at the Feast I have heard of it. I just shake my head and wonder if there is conversion there or are they a tare.

Religious people can do this too and we need to remember Paul's denunciation in Romans 2:17-24. He had been arguing that everyone, not just obviously depraved people, need the gospel and at this point he turns to those who consider themselves religious and he states eight important claims made by the Jews of Paul's day.

1. God has given us His law.
2. He has entered into a special relationship with us.
3. Because we have been given His law we know His will and thus
4. We approve only the most excellent and moral standards and therefore
5. We are guides for the blind.
6. Light for those who are in dark.
7. Instructors for the foolish.
8. Teachers of spiritual infants.

Strikingly, each of these claims was absolutely true, and Paul admits it. But knowledge of the ways of God is not enough! God judges according to truth and not according to appearances; according to what men and women actually do and not according to their mere professions.

Paul then brings forth three examples of the Jew's superior way: The eighth of the Ten Commandments (against stealing), the seventh of the Ten Commandments (against adultery), and a statement joining the first and second of the Ten Commandments (concerning the right worship of God).

The Jews of Paul's day considered these good examples of the superior religious way of life they followed, as opposed to the godlessness of the Gentiles. They felt superior. But what Paul tells the Jews is that God is not satisfied with knowledge of the right way only. He is concerned with deeds, just as Paul told the moral pagans (Romans 2:6-16), and by that standard a Jew is condemned exactly as a pagan is condemned. A Jew judges another, but he is judged out of his own mouth because he himself has done what he condemns.

When Paul comes to the end of this paragraph, he quotes the Old Testament in Romans 2:24, to show that, "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you." Their hypocrisy.

This is always the case when religious persons violate the upright standards they proclaim. They become a stumbling block to others. Jesus warns about this in Matthew 18, and it is as true for us today as it was in the first Christian century. "Be warned," Jesus says.

If you are living like this, it would be better for you that a large millstone had been hung around your neck and you had been drowned in the sea than that you had lived to harm one of Jesus' little ones. That is what happens when people try to become great, of course. They put themselves ahead of others, particularly the small and the weak. They trample on them to get to the top.

What Jesus is saying in Matthew 18:1-6 is that, instead of striving to become greatest in the kingdom of heaven and in the process of attempting this hurting others instead of guarding them, the disciples should rather learn to forget about themselves and to focus their loving attention upon Christ's little ones—the lambs of the flock—and upon all those who in their humble trustfulness resemble those lambs.

Determinism and Free Will

It is difficult to know whether Matthew 18:7 belongs with what comes immediately before or with what comes after because it applies to both passages. It is a standout verse that deals with the matters of sin, determinism, human responsibility, and free will.

It is not difficult to understand why Jesus said this or why Matthew added it to his collection of Jesus' teachings at this point. Sinful people want to excuse their behavior by saying that they just cannot help what they are doing.

I remember many long years ago, the comedian Flip Wilson, sayings, "The Devil made me do it!" In our day this usually takes a materialistic form. I do bad things because of my genetic makeup, or because of the bad neighborhood in which I grew up, or because I was not properly loved and cared for by my parents.

And in religious circles it sometimes takes a theological form. I sin because God has ordained it; it is not my fault. In Paul's day outsiders used this argument to approve of increased sinning. They say, "God has willed it to bring good from it," so Paul writes:

Romans 3:8 And why not say, "Let us do evil that good may come"?—as we are slanderously reported and as some affirm that we say.

This was not something the church was doing, but rather what outsiders were accusing and claiming. Interestingly enough, Jesus does not deny the determinism, though that is not the best word to describe the Bible's teaching in this area.

We can even rightly say that God has determined that it should be so, at least passively, since God is not the originating cause of sin. God allows people to sin, but there is still a penalty for sinning. Jesus is equally insistent that the person who sins or causes others to sin is responsible. It is impossible in this evil world to avoid enticements to sin, but anguish to the one through whom the enticements come. That is the point. The judgment of such a person will be just, and the judgment will be the severest, if the enticement causes one of Jesus' own followers to stumble.

The Need for Self-Discipline

This is not only a warning about harming another believer, we can also harm ourselves, and it is to this point that Jesus turns in:

Matthew 18:8-9 “If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life lame or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into the everlasting fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you. It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes, to be cast into hell fire.”

These verses are an almost exact repetition of Matthew 5:29-30, from the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus was talking about adultery in the Sermon on the Mount, and he was teaching that adultery, or any other sin should be taken seriously. Sin is so serious that any inclination toward it must be dealt with radically.

But this is not exactly what Jesus means, here in Matthew 18:8-9, so Jesus explains His reference to hands and feet (and in verse 9 He adds eyes) by speaking in verse 7 of things that cause people to sin. He means, get rid of whatever is tempting you to sin: suggestive movies; the daily talk shows that wallow in depravity almost endlessly; and books that urge you to get ahead by stepping on others. Protect your mind from the defilement.

Another way that people sometimes sin, even church of God members, is when you become separated from your spouse, and you begin dating again. You are still married! If you are not legally divorced, you are not unmarried, and should not be dating. I have seen that happen often in the past few years. It is a problem in the church of God. Be very careful how we approach this thing.

Of course, in the final analysis the answer to any problem is not merely to run away, especially since it is so difficult to avoid temptations in our culture. The real answer is a love for God and the transformed mind and heart that flow from it.

Did the Apostles Get It?

“Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Jesus answered the question, and we have been trying to understand Jesus’ answer. But did the disciples get it? Were they actually turned and changed to become like little children?

We know they did not get it right away, because they are still fighting for the top position two chapters later in Matthew 20:21. On that occasion the mother of James and John came to Jesus asking that one of her sons be chosen to sit at His right hand and the other son be chosen to sit at His left hand when He came into His Kingdom. Had James and John put her up to it?

When the other disciples heard what she had asked Jesus, Matthew 20:24 says, “They were greatly displeased with the two brothers.” They wanted those positions themselves.

What did Jesus do? He got them together and went through it all again.

Matthew 20:25-28 But Jesus called them to Himself and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

Get back to Christ's example.

As long as Jesus was physically alive with them, they did not get it. But when He died, they did, because they finally understood that He had given Himself for them and had bought their salvation at the cost of His own life. And they really were changed when they received God’s Spirit.

It is beautiful to see. The disciples were all guilty of this self-advancing spirit, according to the gospel. But among the many who were guilty, James and John stand out as the guiltiest because they were guilty of their compliance with the efforts of their mother to get them the first places.

Yet think about what happened to them!

At one time, Jesus called them “Sons of Thunder.” On another occasion, recorded in Luke 9:54, they wanted to call fire down from heaven to destroy a village of the Samaritans that did not receive them. They were not changed until they finally got their minds off themselves and onto the will of God and the sacrifice of Jesus.

We are not told much about James, but he must have changed. We do not hear of him struggling for prominence after the crucifixion and resurrection of the Lord, and he eventually died for Jesus, being executed by King Herod.

John lived to be a venerable old man, known at the last as the “apostle of love.” He spoke humbly when he said in

I John 3:16 By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.

If Jesus can turn a “son of thunder” into an “apostle of love,” He can conquer our pride and teach us humility so that we can become like one of Jesus’ “little children.” He needs to, if we are to belong to His Kingdom.

The Parable of the Lost Sheep

Matthew 18:10 “Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven.”

The reason why we should not despise weak Christians relates to the care Christ gives to them, because they are valuable to Him. Some of the universe's highest and noblest beings, who enjoy the favor and fellowship of God, minister to even the most obscure Christians! God's angels watch over and aid His followers because we are so very precious to God.

Matthew 18:11 “For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost.”

Christ Himself came to save the weak. He came in search of the weak and base that were lost, found them, and redeemed them, according to God's great purpose. They may be obscure and little in the eyes of the world, but they must not be objects of contempt if Christ sought them and died to save them.

Matthew 18:12-14 “What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them goes astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine and go to the mountains to seek the one that is straying? And if he should find it, assuredly, I say to you, he rejoices more over that sheep than over the ninety-nine that did not go astray. Even so it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.”

Many images in the Bible convey the protecting care of God for His people, but probably no image is more greatly loved than that of the shepherd and his sheep. What Christian can consider God as a shepherd without thinking of the Twenty-third Psalm, “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.”

Or, the tenth chapter of John, where Jesus applies the image to Himself, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep.” (John 10:11)

Yet it is not only in these well-known passages that the image occurs. A psalmist wrote:

Psalms 100:3 Know that the Lord, He is God; it is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; we are His people and the sheep of His pasture.

Isaiah 40:11 He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those who are with young.

The image also occurs several times in Matthew. The first was in chapter 2, which cites this prophecy from Micah 5:2:

Matthew 2:6 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are not the least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you shall come a Ruler who will shepherd My people Israel.'

In Matthew 9, he wrote of Jesus' compassion for the confused crowds:

Matthew 9:36 But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd.

In Matthew 26, he reports Jesus quoting Zechariah 13:7:

Matthew 26:31 Then Jesus said to them, "All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night, for it is written: 'I will strike the Shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'

As far as the rest of the New Testament is concerned, Hebrews 13:20 describes Jesus as "that great Shepherd." And I Peter 5:4, calls him, the Chief Shepherd, to whom the under-shepherds are accountable.

The Eighth Parable

The notable thing about Jesus' use of this image in Matthew 18 is that here it is a parable.

Parables were an important teaching device for Jesus. Seven of them were introduced in chapter 13, and although this is the first Jesus used since that chapter, there are eight more from chapter 18 of Matthew on through the rest of Matthew's gospel.

A parable is a story drawn from real life that makes a single or at most a few spiritual points. It differs from a fable, which is not drawn from real life. In Aesop's fables, for example, animals or inanimate objects talk. Also, a parable differs from an allegory in which nearly everything stands for something else.

This Matthew 18 parable is found again in Luke 15:3-7, but the setting and points are different in the two gospels. In Luke, Jesus answers the teachers of the law who are criticizing Him for associating with known sinners. Jesus uses the parable to explain that He is associating with sinners in order to save them, just as a shepherd exerts himself for a lost sheep and rejoices when he finds it. He calls the lost-but-found-sheep a sinner who repents.

In Matthew, Jesus is teaching His disciples, and the point He makes is that they must be like shepherds in their care for other believers, particularly the weakest ones.

This parable fits into the context of Matthew 18 where the disciples ask Jesus, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Jesus answers: (1) the one who is humble, like a little child (2-9); (2) the one who cares for the weak or lost believer (10-14); and (3) the one who forgives other people (15-20).

Here is how it progresses: Disciples who wish to be great are told that, (1) they must accept and show kindness to other believers, enabling their Christian walk and doing everything possible to avoid being a stumbling block to them; (2) they are not to despise or show contempt for other believers but are to offer help to those who may be in danger of going astray, or who may have gone astray; and (3) they are taught what to do if one Christian sins against another. This is a pattern of behavior entirely opposite of the pattern that the world associates with personal greatness or success.

The Shepherd and His Sheep

What is important here is that God is compared to the shepherd who seeks and finds the lost sheep. The parable tells us many important things about God.

But before I do, I want to relate a personal experience Sue and I had last June when we went over to visit the brethren there. We had an opportunity to see the sights. One day we went to the south of England to the coast. And as we looked out over this huge meadow of rolling hills with sheep as far as the eye could see. You could see the English Channel off in the distance.

So we decided to walk in that direction toward the beach. And as we were walking, we were walking among the sheep. This was fascinating. I never realized that how many breeds of sheep there are. We were among the black faced sorts. There might have been a flock of over 200 out there. And as we were walking, tip-toeing through the droppings, they were watching us, they did not run, but they did not let us get close either. So I tried talking to it. That did not help. As I got closer it backed off. Those sheep did not hear the voice of their shepherd. It was fascinating to see all this.

We, too, back away unless we hear Christ's voice, just like those sheep.

(1) God cares for us individually.

When you see a hundred sheep in a pasture, it is hard to imagine how a shepherd can distinguish one from another, and miss one if it has been taken by a predator, or has wandered off. All sheep, at first glance, seem to look alike.

John 10:5 “Yet they will by no means follow a stranger, but will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.”

Nevertheless, it is well known that good shepherds know their sheep. They know them individually and their sheep know them and respond to their voices. Jesus was building on this fact when he described himself as, “The Good Shepherd.”

John 10:14-15 “I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep.”

We know that God knows His people individually and cares for us individually because when He calls us to faith, He calls us by name. That is important. *He called us by our names.*

John 10:3 “To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.”

We see this clearly in the earthly ministry of Jesus. Zacchaeus was a lost sheep. He was a short man who could not see Jesus as he passed by because of the large crowd of people. So, he climbed a tree to get a better view.

Luke 19:1 Then Jesus entered and passed through Jericho. Now behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus who was a chief tax collector, and he was rich. And he sought to see who Jesus was, but could not because of the crowd, for he was of short stature. So he ran ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see Him, for He was going to pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up and saw him, and said to him, "Zacchaeus, make haste and come down, for today I must stay at your house." So he made haste and came down, and received Him joyfully. But when they saw it, they all complained, saying, "He has gone to be a guest with a man who is a sinner." Then Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold." And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham; for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost."

An even more powerful example occurred in Bethany. The brother of Mary and Martha was sick. Word was sent to Jesus, but Lazarus died before Jesus arrived. But Jesus stood before the tomb and cried loudly, "Lazarus, come out!" And he did! Lazarus was another of Jesus' lost sheep, and he responded by returning from the dead.

Or how about Mary? Mary was weeping in the garden where Jesus had been buried following His crucifixion. He spoke to her, but she supposed Him to be the gardener. Then He spoke her name, "Mary." Immediately she knew Him. Her doubts and sorrow fled, faith rose up, and Mary cried, "Rabboni!" which means Teacher.

It is always that way. If you are converted, it is because God called you individually, and when you heard Him call you by name, you turned from trusting yourself and trusted Him instead. That is the kind of relationship God has with His people. It is an individual relationship.

He knows you. If He called you by name when you received your calling, you can be sure that He will exercise that same individual care in keeping you and seeking you if you wander away. You are the one He will go to find and bring home. But remember, wandering away from God's way of life has its negative consequences.

(2) God understands our weaknesses.

Sheep are stupid creatures, probably the most stupid animals on earth. One way they show their stupidity is by so easily wandering away. They can have a good shepherd who has brought them to the best grazing lands, near an abundant supply of water, but they will still wander off to where the fields are barren and the water undrinkable.

Again, by contrast, they are creatures of habit. They will stay in the same spot, grazing on the same land, until every blade of grass and every root is eaten, the fields ruined and themselves impoverished. This has ruined land in many sheep-raising areas of the world.

The wonderful thing is that God does not berate us for being stupid. The psalmist writes:

Psalm 103:14 For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust.

(3) God seeks us when we stray

Does not God have anything better to do than to hunt for lost sheep? He does other important things too. He runs the universe. He directs the flow of history. He sets up kings and brings kings down. But there is a sense in which all these other actions are only a backdrop for His plan of salvation, which means that seeking and saving lost sheep are the most important things God does.

In Revelation 13:8, Jesus is described as, "The Lamb that was slain from the foundation of the world." This means God created the world as a stage upon which His plan of salvation would be acted out.

As we read earlier, Luke 19:10 records that when Jesus came, He described His mission by saying: "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost."

Revelation 5 reveals that at the appointed time, the angelic audience and those who have been saved will praise the Author and Finisher of our faith:

Revelation 5:12-13 Saying with a loud voice: "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honor and glory and blessing!" And every creature which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, I heard saying: "Blessing and honor and glory and power be to Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, forever and ever!"

We should remember one more thing: God does not wait for us to come to Him, because we would not.

Romans 3:11 There is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God."

Romans 5:8 But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

(4) God rejoices when we repent and return to him.

The Greeks believed God cannot have emotions because, if He did and if we are the cause of His emotions, whether grief, anger, sorrow, love, or dismay, then to that extent we would have power over God and control Him. That may sound reasonable as philosophy, but it is not the Bible's teaching.

The Bible says that God grieves over sin, and rejoices when a sinner is reclaimed. Jesus makes this explicit in the parable in Matthew 18:13, saying of the Great Shepherd, "And if he should find it [the lost sheep], assuredly, I say to you, he rejoices more over that sheep than over the ninety-nine that did not go astray."

In Luke 15, three stories tell about something that was lost. The first is the Parable of the Lost Sheep, the parallel to the story we are studying (1-7). The second is a story about a lost coin (8-10). The third, which is the best known, is the story of the prodigal son (11-32).

He, too, was lost, having squandered his inheritance on wild living. But at last he came to his senses and went back to his father to confess his sin and seek a place as his servant. We think of this as a story mainly about the son; we even call it the Parable of the Prodigal Son. But it is actually, about the father, who represents God. The father was longing for his son, waiting for his return, and when he saw his son coming, the father ran to him, threw his arms around him, and kissed him.

Then, in Luke 15, the father instructed his servants:

Luke 15:22-24 “But the father said to his servants, 'Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' And they began to be merry.”

Never think that if you go back to God, you will find Him critical, angry, distant, or vindictive. (That is human.) Everything God has done is for your salvation, and no one in all the universe will be happier at your repentance than God Himself.

(5) God’s pursuit of the lost is effective.

We might suppose that, if all we are thinking about is the parable of the prodigal, that the son might not have returned and that the love of the father might have been frustrated. But that is not what Jesus was getting at.

In the first two parables in Luke 15, the shepherd finds the lost sheep and the woman finds the lost coin. Jesus is emphasizing God’s joy over recovering whatever had been lost. This is what He means in Matthew too, because in Matthew 18:4, Jesus says, “Even so it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.” And, of course, they are not. The Father seeks for them until He finds them and brings them home.

Remember that in Matthew 18, Jesus is teaching the disciples how they are to care for weak believers, the little ones who are in view throughout the chapter. He is not teaching that all people will be saved, the false doctrine known as universalism. He is teaching about the perseverance of the saints, the belief that not even one of those who has been given to Jesus by God will perish.

This is what Jesus teaches in John 10, the chapter we think of most often when we think of Jesus as our Shepherd. In this chapter, after He has spoken of how He will call His sheep and how they will hear His voice and follow Him, Jesus says in:

John 10:28-30 “And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand. I and My Father are one.”

It is difficult to imagine how anyone could be made more secure than that. And if you think of being held by two hands—one hand Jesus’ and the other the Father’s—you can remember that God the Father and God the Son still have two hands free to defend you.

The Elder Brother

I want to go back to the story of the prodigal son, because one part of it is a picture of what we often wrongly do. It is a contrast to what Jesus was urging when He said in:

Matthew 18:10 Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, . . .”

We are told that when the prodigal son came back, his older brother was not home. He was in the fields. But when he came in, heard the rejoicing, asked what it was about, and was told that the younger son had come back, he refused to go in. The father came out for him, but the son argued:

Luke 15:29-31 “So he answered and said to his father, 'Lo, these many years I have been serving you; I never transgressed your commandment at any time; and yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might make merry with my friends. But as soon as this son of yours came, who has devoured your livelihood with harlots, you killed the fatted calf for him.' And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that I have is yours.’”

Many find it easy to sympathize with the older son, but the only reason we do is because we often see ourselves in his shoes. We suppose that we are not like the prodigal son.

We think we have been faithful, hardworking, and obedient. But probably we have not. Or, if we have, it is only because God has already sought and found us. And it is probably true that we have also often wandered away and been brought back.

What were the disciples thinking about when Jesus told them about the lost sheep? They had been arguing about which of them should be greatest in the kingdom of heaven. With that in the immediate background, presumably they were thinking of themselves as among the ninety-nine who were still on the hillside and were wondering which of the ninety-nine would be the “top sheep.” If they were thinking of such things, they would never be concerned for the one who was lost, and they would never do anything to help find him or her.

Who will be greatest?

We should be beginning to understand the answer to that question by now. The greatest believer is the one who is most like the Shepherd, who gave Himself for us. Like little children? Yes. But like the Shepherd too.

We are never more like God than when we exert ourselves, according to the will of God, to help others, and if God rejoices over the one we help to bring home, He is probably rejoicing over what we are doing too.

Wrap Up

Is it not interesting that something lost and then found is more valuable to us than those things that we have with us? To demonstrate further the reason why we should not despise weaker Christians, Jesus illustrates the joy one feels when a lost possession is found. A shepherd rejoices over the recovery of one of his flock that had wandered away, more than over all that stayed with him.

Similarly, God rejoices when a person who has gone astray from His truth turns back to His way of life. In like manner, we rejoice most in our health when we recover from a serious disease.

We rejoice more over a child rescued from danger than over those who were never at risk. We rejoice more when property is saved from fire or flood than when all was well, and we took it for granted.

Certainly, God desires everyone to have salvation according to His joyful plan. He takes the most joy, however, from those who seem to defy the odds to grow and overcome more than others who are more naturally strong.

Romans 15:1-2 We then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification.

The strong must bear with the weak, and together we will glorify God!