

Good morning and welcome to Southover, its good to see you <Party in the Park comment>

We're continuing our series in the gospel of Matthew and today we come to Matthew Chapter 18 – The Parable of the Lost Sheep.

Now this parable is repeated in Luke 15
except in Luke the “Lost Sheep represents Tax Collectors and Sinners”
whereas **here** it represents
“Children - or more accurately Children of God”.

Last week we saw that Jesus used a child to represent those who were seeking to become part of the Kingdom of God.

Today he keeps that child centre stage and says “this is how important those that you think ‘unimportant’ are – this is how important they are to me”

In fact in Luke he says “even Tax Collectors (those you hate for their corruption and dishonesty) are completely valued by me”

v10 “See that you do not look down on one such as these”.

Do not look down on the ‘little people’, do not overlook those who seem to offer nothing, do not ignore those that offend you.

For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.

Now people will write books and books on this
but I am afraid that most of it is conjecture and guess-work.
The truth is that God doesn't really give us much detail on Angels.

In Psalm 91, which is speaking about every believer, the Psalmist says

v11 “God will command His angels concerning you, to guard you in all your ways, they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike a foot against a stone.”

That is about every believer.

In Hebrews 1, he says,

v14 “are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation!”

So what we can say is
Every child of God is represented by an Angel to God,
every Angel serves God's People on God's behalf.

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What Jesus is saying here is “every one of us is that important to God that even the angels themselves take a personal interest in our lives.

Jesus is saying that:

“little people” (whoever we are, whatever that means), Tax Collectors, Sinners, and therefore, *by definition every human,*

is supremely, unaccountably, (almost irrationally) precious to God.

And Jesus goes on to illustrate this by telling a parable about a Sheep getting lost, getting sought and getting found.

It is a story about all of us,

It is a story that changes the way we think and
It is a story that has huge challenges for us as a church.

It's about A sheep, getting **lost**, getting **sought** and getting **found**.

It begins with

1. A Sheep Getting Lost.

v12 "What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off?"

“What do you think?” – he’s looking a reaction!

A Man owns a hundred sheep.
He’s not super rich, He’s not desperately poor.
One of them wanders away.

To be honest all my knowledge of sheep is theoretical.
But from what I’ve read

1.1 Sheep are notorious for not being the wisest things on 4 legs.

Left to themselves they get themselves in all sorts of mess.

I like to think of sheep as those cute white things that you find in children’s stories.
But the reality is, that Sheep left to themselves
get grubby,
can wander off and get themselves isolated
can get themselves into all sorts crazy situations that they cannot handle.

I guess, (without wanting to be rude) we’re all a bit like that
The truth is left to ourselves we follow our hormones, our desires and we screen out the voice of Jesus.
*Sasha is like this with me –
if she thinks I have a treat she can hear my voice from the other side of the playing field.
If she’s eating Amanda’s Raspberry’s she is tone deaf.*

*Isaiah said “ We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each goes our own way;
And so left to ourselves ‘our souls’ can get pretty grubby,
we make mistakes that we regret,
we make choices which we think won’t come and bite us
we do things thinking we’ll never get found out.
We gossip and we don’t think it’ll get back to the person we’re talking about
We watch TV programs that we couldn’t possibly watch if Jesus were sitting beside us
We cloud the truth - because we don’t want to admit we were wrong...*

And as a result we find ourselves in broken situations,
in broken relationships,
feeling that God is remote and distant.
If truth be told, we too are NOT the wisest things that walk the earth.
we get ourselves into all sorts of mess.

1.2 Secondly, sheep are also really vulnerable

*if a Sheep gets in a fight, it’s all over.
They have no talons, no claws, no fangs.
They’re fat & fluffy and they can’t run.*

In the wild – without protection – Mutton is most certainly on the menu for anything that is looking for an accompaniment to mint sauce!

And if tomorrow we hear that a truck has overturned in Lewes and there are hundreds of sheep wandering around, we'd say "my kids would say hey let's go have a look and perhaps we can sneak one home as a pet"

But if tomorrow we hear that a truck has overturned and there are hundreds of Lions on the loose we're going to "lock ourselves in the bathroom and assume the foetal position, right?"

Sheep are vulnerable, they can get themselves stuck in ditches, drowned in rivers, chased by dogs and in Jesus' time eaten by wolves.

And because of this the Shepherd goes after the sheep
both because of his own sense of loss; and o
because the sheep is not going to survive long by itself.

So the Shepherd leaves the 99 in the open field and he goes off in search for the 1 that is lost....

Human Beings, by themselves are vulnerable.
Not only, do we mess up
(And all our politician's will agree that our society IS very, very messed up)
but we get harassed by life's pressures
we worry about those we love
we are powerless in the face of life's disasters
we are a heart-beat away from death
we are, without God, destined for a **lost eternity**.

*We think we're tough and resilient but we're about as tough and resilient as a sheep
We think we're smart but compared to God we're about as Smart as Toaster
We're not tough, we're not smart, we're not going to survive eternity*

Without God we are in danger of wasting our life
- of missing what we have been made for
- of frittering away our lives on things that don't matter; and
- of being eternally separated from God
Without God, we are in danger of hell

and God is not only grieved by his loss
he is overwhelmingly concerned for the fate of every human being
irrespective of their social status, their moral standing, their abilities or goodness

And so Jesus' second point is,

2. About A Sheep being Sought.

v12... will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off?

Have you ever lost something really valuable to you? – it consumes you!

Have you ever lost something that really mattered?

You're searching everywhere for it!

Your keys, your purse, your wallet, your wedding ring, your child!?

Seriously, have you ever lost a child?

That's got to be a bad day!

The first time we lost one of our children –

we didn't say "hey well we've got four more – what's the panic!" –

It felt like the world had fallen in!

Toddlers - they're like Ninjas,

I am convinced that they are already reading books on "The art of stealth" in the womb!

Lesson 1 - When your parents are distracted by the 1001 things they need to do – NOW is the time to sneak off.

Amanda says to me. "I thought she was with you."

Now I know that anything I say from now on is bound to make the situation worse!

So there I am, in the middle of Sainsbury's, running up and down the aisles frantically searching for a child whilst trying to act cool!

Parents - we should issue all children with GPS location devices!

The Shepherd loses a sheep

One. Not 10. Not 50. But 1 out of a 100.

Surely you can afford to lose one??

Surely one can't matter that much!

But no, he leaves the 99 in the hills and goes to look for the one.

He doesn't send one of his hired men.

He goes in person.

This Shepherd know everyone of his sheep by name (John 10.3) and he knows one is missing

some people like trains...

some people like rocks...

this person likes sheep....

He knows one of them is missing.

SO he takes it on himself to walk for miles,

to comb the hills,

to look everywhere

just hoping to find that lost sheep and bring it home.

Jesus likens himself to that Shepherd.

Now this is more profound that it may at first seem...

Because a Shepherd's job is tough.

A Shepherd doesn't live in the city and work in a comfortable office – he roams the hills exposed to the elements.

A shepherd doesn't work 9 to 5 and if the Wolf appears at 6 then he can have his pick. A Shepherds job is 24/7.

A shepherd's job is lonely– not much interaction with other people – just sheep and their conversation is notoriously predictable – baaa...

A Shepherd doesn't get to bathe, they handle animals all day, its dirty work and the shepherd will smell!

And Jesus puts his hand up and says, "I'm like that, I'm that shepherd."

It means that when God became a human being – it was a tough assignment!

He laid his glory, his majesty, his power, his authority aside and became a creature – a small human child.

Who cried because he was frustrated and hungry

Who cried because he was sore and needed changing

Who cried because he was overly tired and he didn't know why he was crying!

He lived amongst us – taking on a lowly job.

He was poor.

He was homeless

He went everywhere by foot

He experienced ignorance and conflict **all** the time.

Often bone weary, dog tired and supremely misunderstood
He was isolated from anyone who ever really thought like him.

The conversation with his disciples was utterly predictable –
“what’s in it for me” – they thought...
about as morally sophisticated as “baaa...”

But the reason why he did it is
because God likes people, all people, every type of people.
children and elderly
rich and poor
gay and straight
good and bad –
clean living and corrupt
he loves them all and he wants none to perish

This is not a story about the shepherd going to find 100s,1,000s of sheep.
It’s one sheep. It’s you. It’s always you. It’s personal.

So no matter how grubby you get
no matter how lost you find yourself
no matter how stubborn and resentful and rebellious and angry you feel
God is looking for you.

If you get yourself all tangled up in sin and find yourself in a total mess... God is looking for you.

If you feel too ashamed to ever return to him again...
God is looking for you.

If you’ve wandered away
God is looking for you.

One of the amazing differences between Christianity and **all other religions** is that God is prepared to get
dirty looking for you

One of the amazing differences between Christianity and all other religions is that God values even the
most corrupt, the most desperately broken, the most serially repetitive sinners (like me and)... you.

God is looking for you

3. Thirdly, will you let yourself be Found?

v13 And if he finds the sheep, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off.

After days of walking and hiking and looking and working.
And as soon as he finds the sheep, he picks it up (and Luke has it that) he puts it on his shoulder and carries
it all the way home.

He carries the full weight of it, shoulders the full burden of it,
from where he found it ... all the way back to safety.

When Jesus finds us,
he doesn’t ask us to get ourselves home,
he doesn’t say “pull yourself together and follow me”
he doesn’t say “I expect you to do better than this”

he asks nothing of us, except to let ourselves be picked up, and carried home.

Jesus shoulders the burden of what it costs to get us safe into the Kingdom of Heaven.

Just as he carried the cross up the hill

So he carries our sins from wherever he finds us, in whatever state we are in, he takes it all on himself and bears the burden home.

The cost of the shepherd to find his sheep is, in Jesus' case, to lay his life down for them.

It is extra-ordinary.

It is frankly ridiculous that the Shepherd would ever dream of doing such a thing for a sheep.

But Jesus does for us,

he bears our sin

he shoulders the responsibility

he does everything he needs to do to bring us into the Kingdom.

And he asks just three things from us.

3.1 Firstly, to let ourselves be found.

The parable ends with an IF

v13, and IF he finds the sheep –

because the reality is that he doesn't always.

If the sheep doesn't want to be found

If the sheep sees the Shepherd runs away from him

If the sheep is already dead

there is no rejoicing.

Jesus searches for you,

but if you won't be found that is your choice.

The courts of heaven will go silent

The heart of God will break

A cry of anguish will be wrong from Jesus on the cross

*"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather **your children together**, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you would not.*

You would not be saved

You would not come home

You would not let me carry you

The most haunting verse in the Bible is Jer 8:20

"The harvest is past, the summer has ended, and we are not saved."

Never let that be said of you.

The Shepherd is calling

He is willing to forgive you, to embrace you, to love you.

to bring you home

And it doesn't matter what you've done and

it doesn't matter how far you've strayed and

it doesn't matter how long you've been away

He'll take you back right now.

So let yourself be found

3.2 Secondly, be part of the flock.

How does a sheep know they are lost? –

They find themselves detached from the flock

Every sheep needs a flock.

There is safety in the flock,
there is encouragement in the flock,
there is the shepherd's care in flock.

Sheep do not survive long by themselves
If you're a Christian you need this flock
You're not made to be alone
You're made for community. to welcome, to learn, to serve each other.

Of course we'll get bumped in the flock,
Of course another sheep may even take a bite out of you
Of course they all smell!

The truth is
Sometimes we do disappoint each other .
Sometimes we do sin against each other.
Sometimes we even irritate each other and let each other down!

And if as a result.
we are tempted to close our hearts to one another.
to complain about each other.
to walk away from.
Jesus says we sin, we get ourselves lost!

we have no right to reject people that God accepts.
We have no right to hold a grudge against people God loves.
We have no right to judge them
No.
When we stop caring about other believers –
especially those who aren't as good as we are,
who aren't as kind, or gentle or understanding,
when we look down on them
when we look down on them because they are spiritual toddlers still learning to walk
we miss what being a Christian is all about.
They haven't learnt to walk yet, to walk the talk yet – welcome them
because Jesus says he came to seek and save people just like that

You need Jesus to carry you
You need to be part of this flock

3.3. Finally, you need to develop a heart for the lost.

I've avoided it all morning
but I can't anymore

It is shocking when Jesus says

v13 I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off.

It is shocking that the shepherd is willing

v12 to leave the 99 sheep on the hillside to go and look for the one.

Why would the shepherd spend so much time doing that>
Why would the shepherd looking for the lost when he should be looking after the found?
Why would any church sets its focus on the lost and not the found?

Because the found are already safe.

His priority is those who are in peril.

As a church our mission, our purpose, is not to serve ourselves, it is to serve the lost.

What drives every decision for us – **has to be** “what about the lost”
“what about the ones NOT here?”

My friends, this is what makes a gospel church different
we are not in it for ourselves
we feel the pain and the grief of the Shepherd, there is a whole town that, as a result of their own choices,
are in danger of hell.

You may say, **but what about us?**
It is a fair question.

And I guess my answer is this
it is in giving that WE receive
it is in putting ourselves last that WE come first
it is in laying down our life that we find out what life is actually all about.

Every controversial decision we have made in the last 8 and that we will make for the 8 years is driven by
our concern for the lost.
I'm not saying we've got everything right!

But I am saying “a heart for the lost” is the only game in town.
It must be what drives us.

I have found that the more a church seeks the lost the stronger its experience of God
The more I look to others the more I am equipped to cope with my own pains and hurts and struggles.

There is a truth here
Jesus spent his whole life on others,
as a result he had more peace, more strength, more power in the Holy Spirit than anyone who has ever
lived.

Satan threw at him, the world threw everything at him, we threw everything at him – and took it all.
Because he loved the world, he loved others, he loved us.

If we are to flourish, if we are to find life, if we are to find the answer to our prayers
we need to develop a heart for the lost
we need to find our place in the flock
we need to let Jesus carry us home.