

Matthew 18:10-14

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want, he makes me down to lie. In pastures green he leadeth me, the quiet waters by.

And the psalm goes on, and we're very familiar with the words of Psalm 23. You know the psalm, perhaps more than any other psalm, a picture is painted by the psalmist that is so beautiful and so evocative that we are drawn again and again to sing the words, and I trust reflect on the truths that the words express.

The Lord's my shepherd. Hallelujah. But what happens when, contrary to reason, the sheep wanders?

What happens when I wander from the flock? What happens when you wander from the flock? What happens when one of God's people, one who has been able to say and perhaps still is able to declare, the Lord's my shepherd, and indeed do so sincerely and truthfully, and yet wanders from the green pastures and the still, still waters?

This is the concern of the parable that I want us to look at this evening that we've read there in Matthew chapter 18.

[1 : 31] And the way we'll give thought to these few verses is as follows. First of all, we'll notice the truth that Jesus is looking to illustrate by the parable.

In verse 10, the parable has not yet begun, but Jesus introduces the parable by declaring a truth. And He then illustrates that truth with the parable.

And in illustrating it, He draws out and identifies other truths, I suppose we could say. But verse 10, you have Jesus declaring something to be true, and then the parable illustrates it.

And we'll simply follow in that way, obviously giving more time to the parable itself. But first of all, let's just notice verse 10 and the truth that is illustrated by the parable. Now, it's important to be aware of the context in which Jesus taught this parable.

He's begun to teach the disciples about what it is to live as part of this new community of the kingdom, where He is the King.

[2 : 39] Of course, the disciples are only beginning to understand the concepts, indeed, beginning to understand that Jesus is the King. But He is beginning to introduce them to what it is to live as a disciple, as a member of God's kingdom, and how those who are members and disciples are to relate to one another and support one another and help one another.

And what is particularly being highlighted in the previous section of the chapter that leads us into this parable is the importance in Jesus' perspective of those who are weak in the faith, those who are prone to wander.

And He has represented them in what has gone before by a little child. He brought a little child and presented them to the disciples and spoke of how concerned He was for the care of that little child. And implicit in that was, and so should you be. So, that's the context that leads us to this parable. And in that verse 10, He speaks about little ones.

And clearly, when He goes on to give the parable, He's talking about the same little ones. So, it's important for us to identify who these little ones are. Notice how in verse 10, See that you do not look down on one of these little ones, for I tell you that there are angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.

[4 : 09] So, who are these little ones about which Jesus will go on to speak in the parable? Well, in the previous verses, He had brought to the attention of the disciples a little child, an actual child.

But it's very clear that the child is presented to them to represent His disciples, who are also weak and vulnerable. And it's clear even in the parable, or in the conclusion, if you wish, the summary statement of the parable, where the same expression is used, little ones, in the same way your

Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.

I think it's very clear that His reference to little ones is a reference to His own disciples, weak, vulnerable, prone to wonder. That is who He is speaking about.

Well, He's speaking about us, His disciples. We are these little ones, spoken of in verse 10, and then spoken about in the parable.

Verse 10 also makes it clear and highlights God's very intimate care for the little ones, for His own disciples, and very especially those who are weak and vulnerable.

[5 : 30] And that care that God has for them is declared in a very intriguing way. We're told there in verse 10, For I tell you that there, angels in heaven, always see the face of my Father in heaven.

Now, as I say, that's a very intriguing statement, and it immediately kind of awakens questions. What does that mean?

What does it mean? Clearly, the big truth is that God is concerned for them. He's concerned for His little ones. He's concerned for His disciples. But how does that concern find expression as declared here?

How are we to understand this reference to their angels, the angels of the little ones? Well, let's just very quickly mention one or two thoughts about that, or one or two, perhaps an explanation in as much as we're able, of what Jesus says here.

First of all, let me say what Jesus is not saying, or certainly in my understanding, what Jesus is not saying. Attractive, perhaps to some, though the proposition might appear, I don't think the expression is indicating that we all have guardian angels, one angel appointed to our care.

[6 : 52] And I have to say that if you simply read what is stated there, it might give that impression. For I tell you that their angels, the angels of the little ones, always see the face of my Father in heaven.

And so it wouldn't be unreasonable to come to that conclusion. But I think there are two reasons why we ought not to come to that conclusion. First of all, the words themselves don't require it. The little ones are a collective group of disciples.

And then Jesus speaks of their angels. And it's perfectly reasonable to understand it as, well, you have this collection of disciples who require care, and there is a collection of angels, indeed all the angels, who are entrusted in some measure with their care.

We're not required to understand what Jesus says as being that one angel is appointed to one disciple. So the language doesn't require it. But perhaps more importantly, or reinforcing that point, is the simple fact that something as significant as that possibility that each disciple is appointed an angel to provide protection, it's so significant a proposition that you would expect it to be reinforced and to be taught elsewhere in the Bible.

And the reality is that though we search through the Bible where there is significant material that speaks of angels and of their ministry, we will not find any other occasion where there is any explicit statement that this is so, that we all have a guardian angel attractive, as though that might perhaps appear to some.

[8 : 33] So that's what it's not saying. What is it saying? Well, what do the words of Jesus say about angels? Well, fundamentally what it tells us is that it tells us what their reason for being is, what their ministry is, and that is the service of the saints.

Now that's a truth that certainly is reinforced and made very clear and explicit elsewhere. Perhaps the classic statement that would reinforce that is found in Hebrews chapter 1 and in verse 14, the final verse of the first chapter of Hebrews, where this question is posed and clearly a rhetorical question, are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?

So you couldn't get clearer than that. What is the role of angels? What is the ministry of angels? Well, their purpose is to serve God as they serve God's people, as they serve God's disciples, as they serve the little ones, to use the language of Jesus here.

That is their ministry. But it's also made clear in verse 10 that not only is that their ministry, but they are spiritual beings who have permanent access to the Father in heaven.

For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven. And here, almost in the sense of them representing us, of course, they're not mediators. We have only one mediator.

[10 : 00] But in their ministry of serving us, they're not alone. God Himself is there to direct them. God Himself is there to hear the concerns that they might have about us.

Even as we speak about this, there's always the danger of entering into the field of speculation. But some things are very clear. Angels have as their ministry to serve us.

believers, disciples, little ones. And they are ever about their business of doing so. In that regard, if there's any sense of disappointment, and I don't know if anybody is disappointed at the thought that you don't have a guardian angel, though you're not obliged to share my conclusion on this, but if there is any sense of disappointment, I hope it can be overcome by the fact that rather than have one angel, you have all the angels.

All the angels are entrusted with our care. And so we can hardly be disappointed if indeed there isn't one who has that particular task of looking after us.

It almost wouldn't be fair because some people would be way much worse than others, but that's just a thought that came to my mind that perhaps should have remained in my mind. But anyway, Jesus here is making clear that His little ones, His weak, vulnerable disciples are loved by Him, are cared for by Him, and the angels are employed by Him as one manner in which we are taken care of.

[11:36] But let's move on to the parable itself. How does the parable reinforce or illustrate this truth that Jesus expresses about His little ones, their need for care, and the depth of His care for them?

Let's identify, first of all, the characters in the parable and who they represent. Really, you have... it's not complicated. It's a very short parable. You have a shepherd and you have sheep.

One shepherd and a hundred sheep. The shepherd represents God, but the shepherd also represents... and this is very important because in this parable, I think very clearly, the shepherd also represents the church.

There is a very clear sense, and I hope that becomes clear as we make our way through the parable, that what is being said here by Jesus is not simply, oh, you know, rejoice in this wonderful truth that God is your shepherd and He loves you and He cares for you, but there is a challenge to us who belong to the church, who are disciples, to be shepherdly in our treatment of and in our care and concern for one another.

And so, in that regard, the shepherd not only is representing God, but is representing the church as it would care for the sheep who form part of the flock of the church.

[13:06] Then, of course, you have the sheep, and the sheep, and I think it's clear from what I've said already, but just to reinforce what's already been said, is that the sheep here represent wandering disciples.

Now, here you do have a contrast with the parable that is very similar that we find in Luke chapter 15, the parable of the lost sheep. Indeed, in some ways it's so similar that we might imagine that they're almost parallel accounts of the same parable, but I don't think they are.

They're very similar in the images that they use, even in terms of some of the details of the parable, very similar, but there is a clear distinction between the two.

So, in Luke chapter 15, the lost who are being sought represent those who are unbelievers. They're being pursued so as to be saved.

Whereas in Matthew, or in the parable recorded by Matthew, those who are being pursued, those who are being sought by the shepherd are those who are wandering.

[14:10] Even the language that is used is different. It's perhaps dangerous to lay too much weight on that, but rather than lost, they're described as wandering. They're disciples.

They're the little ones. They're weak disciples like you and me, and they're being pursued so as to be restored. And so, I think there is that distinction. Well, let's go through the parable step by step and draw out truths about the Lord as our shepherd and the challenge to us to care for each other in a shepherdly manner.

I think one very obvious truth that the parable takes as a given. Indeed, it wouldn't work if this wasn't a truth, but it is, I think, worth highlighting is that sheep wander.

That's what happens. That's what sheep do. Sheep wander. And it happens all the time. If we immediately see this parable in terms of its significance and who it represents, if the sheep represent us, then we as believers, as disciples, we wander.

You wander. Your brothers and sisters in the faith wander. Indeed, we could look around church even this evening, and no doubt there would be one or two of the seats here that are unoccupied that would be occupied were it not for the reality that sheep wander.

[15 : 28] It happens. It's a reality, and we have to acknowledge it and recognize it. Though I might add, if we can just kind of draw to our memory, if you were here last Sunday evening, we were thinking about, you know, the parable of the prodigal son, and we're highlighting that it's the parable of the prodigal sons, and how we noticed that one of the sons seemingly hadn't wandered at all, and yet he was further from the father than the one who had wandered.

So it's possible to be within the confines of a building and still be wandering in a spiritual way. But anyway, that's another matter. The point is that sheep wander.

And note that in the parable, the problem is not about the sheep being attacked. You know, the sheep hasn't been attacked by a lion or a wolf or a bear, or as you sometimes encounter in accounts in the Bible.

Nor has the sheep been stolen by a sheep rustler. Rather, the sheep has simply wandered off of its own free will. And that's what disciples do.

We are prone to wander. Now, why do we wander? Well, there's any number of reasons.

Sometimes a cocktail of several reasons. Sometimes we wander because of sin, when we're guilty of sin that we're unwilling to face up to, that we're unwilling to repent of, and church becomes an uncomfortable place to be.

[16 : 48] And so we wander. There may be an element of shame. There may be an element of rebellion. But we wander because of that. Other times, it's simply a growing cold that it's really, perhaps quite difficult to explain.

We're conscious that it's the reality, that we, you know, in some measure there isn't that fervor for our first love that there was in previous times, and we grow cold.

Now, we can carry on coming to church faithfully week by week while we are growing cold, but for others that will be evidenced in a physical wandering, no longer being involved in the same measure or at all.

So sin, growing cold, there may be problems within the fellowship, maybe difficulties with others who form part of a given fellowship, and that discourages us.

And so it's easier for us simply not to be present. And then simply the stuff of life. You know, the stuff of life. You know, work can be difficult, and we can have financial difficulties, and there's maybe illness in the family, and we're just burdened down, and for whatever reason, these factors, one in particular or a combination of them, lead us to wander from the flock.

[18 : 13] So that's the first very obvious truth that the parable highlights, that this is a reality, that sheep wander. The second very obvious truth, but also worth highlighting, is that the shepherd notices. Again, this seems almost painfully obvious, but we do need to highlight the importance of it.

The shepherd clearly notices the missing sheep, if not immediately, certainly very quickly. Whether he had the custom of counting his sheep on a daily basis, we don't know.

It's a parable, and we're not given that level of detail. But it's very clear that the shepherd, very soon after the sheep has wandered, has noticed his absence, or the sheep's absence.

He's attentive to his flock. And of course, the challenge to us, we've indicated that this parable, in Jesus' intention, is very much not simply to celebrate the shepherdly love of God, but to challenge us to behave in a shepherdly manner.

And so there, the challenge is clear. You know, are we attentive to those around us who may be wandering? We won't know the reasons often, but are we even careful to notice that that is the case?

[19 : 28] And the shepherd notices not only that a sheep has wandered, but a sheep who, you might say, in the grand scheme of things, was not of great importance. The sheep represent the little ones.

And that language of little ones is maybe worth just dwelling on for a moment. The importance of the one, the importance of the individual. One sheep is wandering, but for the shepherd, this is a big deal.

For the shepherd, this is a big challenge. It cannot be ignored. He can't simply say, well, one out of a hundred is no big deal. You know, these things happen. Sheep wander. We'll just move on. No, the shepherd is concerned for this one sheep.

And this one little sheep, or to use the expression that the parable is introduced with the little one. The one who appears unimportant. The one who is weak.

The one who is vulnerable. The one whose life maybe is very messy. And they wander. And you might say, well, what can we do? That's the way it goes.

[20 : 30] So, the shepherd notices. A couple of things that we can draw out from that. First of all, just at the personal level for ourselves. Take heart when you find yourself wandering to some degree.

Take heart from the fact that God, your heavenly shepherd, notices and is watching over for you and indeed will be seeking the manner to draw you back to the flock.

Perhaps others haven't noticed, but be assured that God does take note. But then, of course, the challenge to us that we would be of those who are attentive to those around us, to the one, to the little one.

And we can maybe expand that, not just the fellowship of believers who make up the congregation, but others who in one way or another are involved with or become part of our fellowship.

Of course, it can be one of our fellow brothers or sisters who is wandering from the faith in some way. We are to take note. And, of course, we'll find in a moment we'll see that it's not just to take note.

[21 : 32] But certainly, we are to take note. When visitors come and welcome, come to visit us, you know, the care that should be given to the little one, to that visitor who doesn't seem to be really that significant or important in the eyes of the world, that we would be concerned for the little one.

Those who come into our building for the food bank or for the lunch club, you know, there we also have those who we might broadly describe as God's little one, seemingly unimportant in the view of many.

But may that not be our estimation. We could go on. So, the shepherd notices, but then, of course, at the heart of the parable is the reality that the shepherd searches.

He searches for the sheep who has wandered. He's a wandering sheep, not a lost sheep, but a wandering sheep. Why does he search? Well, at one level, because it's the right thing to do.

If we see the way in which the parable is, how could we say, how it's summarized in verse 14, we see how this is the Father's will.

[22 : 42] In the same way, your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost. This is God's will. This is the Father's will, that His little ones be protected, that if they have wandered, that they be restored to the flock.

And so, to search for them, clearly, given that that is the Father's will, is the right thing to do. It's not just the right thing to do, but it's what His heart constrains Him to do.

It's imbued in everything that we read in these verses, the love of the shepherd for His little ones.

And so, the challenge for us, again, I think, is very self-evident.

And we are to give expression to the love that we have for the little ones that in some measure reflects the Father's love for the little ones by seeking out those who need seeking out.

Love is a doing word. It's not really the issue whether you particularly like somebody or particularly close to somebody, but you can still love them. You love them by what you do in their favor.

[23 : 52] Why does the shepherd search? But then also, how does he search? Well, there's a couple of things, maybe two in particular that we could highlight from the parable. Well, first of all, we could describe his searching as single-minded.

That's at the heart of what is said. If a man owns a hundred sheep and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine in the hills and go to look for the one that has wandered off? So, he focuses his entire attention on the one who has wandered.

He leaves the ninety-nine and he single-mindedly seeks out the one who has been lost. And again, we can very, I think, very easily draw out the application.

Seeking out those who are wandering should be a priority for us. It is just a parable. Nobody would draw out from that that you should do nothing other than that. But the principle of giving it due priority, I think, is very clear and evident.

But not only single-mindedly, the shepherd also searches sacrificially. You can imagine the cost that the shepherd would incur in seeking out the sheep that has wandered.

[25 : 01] He faces danger and darkness and exhaustion. And of course, when we take a step back from the parable and we think of how God in His shepherdly love fought us, sought to restore us to fellowship with Himself, we see, of course, the huge price that He was willing to pay in the giving over to death of His own Son, the Good Shepherd who came to seek and to save that which was

lost.

And so, this search is sacrificial in its character. And again, we can think of how that would apply to us. What will it cost us to seek, to draw back to the fellowship, back to the flock, back to God, those who wander?

It may take time. It may take us out of our comfort zone. It may involve for us disappointment and hurt when the outcome is not as we had hoped.

And perhaps you could identify other ways in which there will be a cost incurred. One final thing that I want to notice about this parable is what we might call the outcome of the search.

And it's interesting that in the parable you have one outcome, but I think the parable also contemplates two outcomes. And that sounds a little bit of a mystery, but let me explain what I mean by that.

[26 : 18] How there is one outcome, but it contemplates two outcomes. The outcome that it contemplates is failure. And the language that Jesus uses is, I think, quite striking and maybe quite surprising to us.

In verse 13, when he is telling this parable about the shepherd, how does he introduce the outcome? He says, and if he finds it. That's interesting, isn't it?

He doesn't say and when he finds it. He says, if he finds it. And we think, oh, how can that be? Surely the shepherd, he's got to find the sheep. You know, he can't contemplate him not finding the sheep, but the parable does contemplate that the sheep is not found, that the sheep is not restored to the fellowship.

It says, if he finds it. And while we don't want to load too much significance on this one little word, I think it is worth pondering on. And of course, in the reality of what the parable represents, wandering disciples, the likes of us, of course, the reality is that wandering sheep don't always come back when they are sought.

That doesn't mean we shouldn't go out and seek them, but there's no guarantee that the sheep will come back. Of course, we know in the big picture of God's salvation, we know that all those who are truly sheep of the flock are brought back in God's time.

[27 : 40] But the point remains that the search for a wandering disciple does not always end in celebration. So, this outcome is contemplated in the language that Jesus uses.

But of course, in the parable itself, the outcome is a much happier one. It says, and if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the 99 that did not wander off. And so, also contemplated, perhaps anticipated, is success as the wandering sheep is brought back and all the joy that accompanies that reality.

Again, the language might leave us a little intrigued when we think about why would the shepherd be happier about that one sheep who wandered than about the 99 who did not wander.

It's not that he loves the wandering sheep more than the 99, but it's simply a reflection that there is a special joy, a particular joy, a particular celebration when one who has wandered is brought back.

[28 : 45] And indeed, the joy is not only with respect to the wandering sheep, but I think the joy also has to do with the fact that the flock has been restored to its full number.

Because you see, when a sheep wanders, it's not just the wandering sheep who is affected, but the flock is also affected because they're left short of one of their number. And so when the wandering sheep is returned to its place, there's joy for the one who has returned, but there's also the joy for the flock as a whole.

Let me just close by asking a final question. Why did Jesus tell this parable? Now, I think I've already attempted to answer that question, but let me just finish by stressing what perhaps has already been said.

Why did Jesus tell this parable? Was it principally to teach us about God's love for every one of His children, every one of His little ones? Well, certainly that is a purpose of the parable, and it certainly does do that.

It illustrates to us very vividly God's love for His little ones. It does do that. But I think the primary reason for Jesus telling this parable was to spur us on to love, to care for, to gently pursue the wandering brother or sister.

[30 : 06] I think that's Jesus' principal intent. Indeed, it's interesting in what immediately follows in Matthew, and I'll give you a little task to close this evening. Notice for me, or find for me, what is the first verb following the end of the parable that relates to what we need to do, to what you need to

do?

Seemingly, we're moving on to a completely different section, but it's not. What's the first, not the first verb, but the first verb that speaks about something that a disciple needs to do? It's in the next verse.

We haven't read that verse, but look at verse 15, and what follows. Well, let me just read it. I guess you've found it already, but if your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault.

It seems to me that this section, which seems to be unrelated to the parable, is far from being unrelated because what Jesus does is give a concrete example of a wandering little one, and what are those who are part of the church to do?

They are to go. They are to go to look for them. In this case, there's an offense that needs to be sorted out, but the point is there is this urge to go, and that follows on immediately from this parable that speaks of a shepherd going and looking for and bringing back, and so as I say, I think that again just further emphasizes that this parable has its intention to challenge us, to challenge you and me, to be shepherdly in our care for one another.

[31 : 37] Well, may God help us so to live. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your Word. We thank you for the manner in which it does speak to us, and speak to us often in a very challenging, sometimes a very uncomfortably challenging way.

But we thank you for the manner in which it identifies what is the real world, the real world of congregations, of churches, of fellowships, of groups of believers, where we do have difficulties, where we do grow cold, where some of us do wonder in one way or another.

And we do pray that you would be helping us like the shepherd of the parable to be attentive to one another, to be willing to, in a sacrificial way, seek to care for and to pursue, gently pursue those who are wondering.

And so we pray that you would help us in this. And forgive us for the many times where we have fallen short in this responsibility that you have given us. And we pray this in Jesus' name.

Amen.