

# Seeking the Lost

Matthew 18:1–20

## Introduction

Sheep were important to Israel's life. They were a source of food and wool, used in sacrifices, and especially, they were the main food in the Passover meal. The firstlings belonged to God. The wool from the first shearing of fleece belonged to the Levites. So, as I pointed out in *Parables of a 21st Century Shepherd*, God often used this shepherd/sheep relationship to picture His relationship with His people. The leaders of Israel were called shepherds. Jesus is the Good Shepherd (*John 10:1–18*). He is called the Chief Shepherd when He returns (*1 Peter 5:4*). So, it's not difficult to see Jesus as the shepherd in the parable. His sacrificial love and concern for His sheep drive Him to seek the lost. But one thing always confused me about this parable. The shepherd leaves ninety-nine valuable sheep out on the mountain to look for one lost sheep. That doesn't make sense. Who's watching the sheep? What's going to happen to them while the shepherd is away? What is Jesus telling us about God and His kingdom?

## The 99 Abandoned

The mountain was a dangerous place. Now, we might be thinking, *there are caves in mountains. Maybe he left them in a cave where they would be relatively safe. Or maybe he left them with family members or under shepherds.* In both cases we would be wrong. There's no evidence of a cave: Jesus says the shepherd *left them on the mountains (v. 12)*. And there's no evidence of another caregiver. The word translated *leave* means to "leave alone", to "abandon." What was this shepherd thinking? That's what the people Jesus was teaching would think as well.

## The Seedy Side of Shepherds

Betty's brother, Carl Roemer, helped me understand this a little better this week. In his book, *Who in the World was Jesus?* he does a study of all Jesus' parables. He points out that there was another side to shepherds. They were often troublemakers and carousers. They allowed their sheep to graze anywhere, making them thieves. It was considered a marginal occupation at best. So, by having the shepherd abandon the ninety-nine, we can hear the criticism of Jesus ministry to outsiders. Think of how the people reacted when Jesus met Zacchaeus, the tax collector, another man with a despised occupation (read *Luke 19:4–7*). Jesus' life and ministry was opposite to *Psalm 1: Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers (Psalm 1:1)*.

## What Happened to the 99?

So, when the shepherd finds the lost sheep, what happened to the ninety-nine? Jesus doesn't tell us the end of the story. In O. Henry-like fashion, Jesus leaves us to write our own ending. Was the flock reunited? Did the shepherd come back to find they had all been lost? Was he proved a fool for his actions? Israel was expecting God, through His Messiah, to restore the kingdom of Israel, as the disciples showed just before Jesus ascended back to heaven. *"Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6)*. But that's not the point of the parable.

## Jesus Came to Save the Lost

The point is just what Jesus said when He was talking to Zacchaeus, *“The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10)*. Jesus’ express purpose for taking on the form of a man and coming to the earth was to go to the cross and die for all who are lost in sin. When Jesus called Matthew, another tax collector, to be His disciple and celebrated with him and some of his tax collecting buddies, the Pharisees complained. Jesus replied, *“I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Matthew 9:13)*.

## Who Are the Righteous?

Who are the righteous? They are represented by the Jewish leaders who rejected Jesus. They are all who have no need of a Savior. The irony is that Jesus died for them, too. But the Pharisees in Jesus’ day didn’t think they needed a Savior, someone to die for them. For they were God’s chosen people. They were the righteous that Jesus was talking about. There are people like that today. They may not see themselves as God’s chosen people, but they don’t see the need of a Savior. They are doing fine, thank you. This is why we preach the Law to unrepentant sinners. The Gospel doesn’t do them any good until they see they have a need for it.

## We Are All Lost

In the movie that bears his name, Thor (Chris Hemsworth) has been banished from Asgaard and stripped of his powers for reckless behavior and defying his father, King Odin (Anthony Hopkins). He’s having drinks with physicist Erik Selvig (Stellan Skarsgard) and tells him, “I’ve never felt so lost in my life.” Selvig replies, “A man can’t truly know where he’s going until he admits he has no idea where he is.” The truth is we are all lost, all in need of a Savior. But we cannot be found until we admit that we’re lost. As Isaiah says, *“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all (Isaiah 53:6)*.

## Christ Still Seeks the Lost Today

Christ is still seeking the lost today. Every time His Word is read, there is Christ, seeking the lost. He comes to repentant sinners to forgive their sin and cleanse them from all unrighteousness and deliver them from eternal death. Every time we gather at the Table, there is Christ, seeking the lost. He comes, seeking us out to forgive our sins and strengthen our faith with His own body and blood. In His great love, God still seeks the lost.

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*And the peace of God,  
Which surpasses all understanding,  
Will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*

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