

BYOB – Parables 3 (The Lost Sheep)

Luke 15:3-7

Jesus told them this story: “If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them gets lost, what will he do? Won’t he leave the ninety-nine others in the wilderness and go to search for the one that is lost until he finds it? And when he has found it, he will joyfully carry it home on his shoulders. When he arrives, he will call together his friends and neighbors, saying, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.’ In the same way, there is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven’t strayed away!”

This is what we call the “parable of the lost sheep.” It’s probably very familiar to some of you, and others maybe this is the first time you’ve heard it.

Well now you know why **worship songs** sometimes talk about leaving the 99 and why so many **paintings** of Jesus - the “good shepherd” - show him carrying a little lamb on his shoulders.

This is one of those classic, simple parables of Jesus that sticks with you.

Now this is a BYOB series - Bring Your Own Bible. At Grace we believe the Bible is a **doorway to your best possible life** and so we want to help you understand it.

This month we’re helping you understand Jesus’ parables. So let’s dive in.

Now, quick reminder:

parable - a short story or illustration conveying a deeper truth

But as we’ve been saying in this series, the parables of *Jesus* were way more **than just morality tales** (like Aesop’s Fables or Grimm’s Fairytales). They didn’t just have “the moral of the story.”

Instead, they were provocative and sometimes shocking depictions of God's **upside-down kingdom**. Jesus used parables to describe how God was saving the world in ways nobody expected.

These stories seemed like nonsense to those who weren't open to the message, but to those with "ears to hear," the parables invited Jesus' listeners to **an entirely new, provocative way to see the world**.

Now at first glance it may not seem like the parable of the lost sheep applies to that. When you first hear it, it strikes you as a sweet and tender metaphor for God's love. Pretty straightforward, right?

Well for sure... this *is* a parable about God's persistent love. But as we're going to see in a moment, **there's more going on here**.

I think when people first heard Jesus tell this parable, their response wasn't, "Aww, how nice..." I think they would have probably been like, "Gasp! I can't believe he just went there."

Let me show you why...

First, as I always say, it's so important for us to understand the **context** of what we're reading in the Bible. How does one passage connect to the ones around it? **The world of the text**.

This particular parable shows up in two different places - Luke 15, which we just read, and Matthew 18. They're very similar, but their context is a bit different.

In **Luke**, Jesus tells this story because the **religious leaders** were getting uncomfortable with the fact that he was spending so much time hanging out with tax collectors and other "notorious sinners."

You can picture them all standing in a corner with their arms crossed. They're complaining about who he's associating with, so Jesus says, "if a man has 100

sheep and one of them gets lost...” and so on.

In **Matthew**, on the other hand, Jesus tells this story because his disciples come to him and ask, “**Who is the greatest** in the Kingdom of God?”

In response, Jesus calls over a little child, puts him right in the middle of the group, and says, “if you become as humble as this little child, *then* you’re the greatest in the kingdom.”

“Oh, and by the way... if any of you stand in the way of one of these little ones coming into God’s kingdom, it is not going to go well for you. If a man has 100 sheep and one of them wanders away...” and so on.

So in one instance he tells the story because the religious leaders don’t like the sinners he’s with and in another his disciples are asking him who is the greatest in the kingdom. So he brings over a little child.

Why does Jesus use this same parable in response to **two completely different situations**? And why do *I* think people would have been shocked to hear him say it?

Well, the answer to both questions lies in something we’ve been saying throughout this series: That by telling parables Jesus was stepping into the role of a **prophet of God**, just like the Old Testament prophets.

As I said in week 1, many of his parables (about vineyards and seeds and trees) are directly referencing parables that the ancient prophets told hundreds of years before.

You may not know this, but whenever Jesus is telling parables about sheep (like this one, and the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25), he’s directly referencing **the prophet Ezekiel**.

So let’s take a look at what Ezekiel had to say, and we’ll see why Jesus’ parable

of the lost sheep isn't just a sweet depiction of the love of God, but also a scathing indictment of Israel's religious leaders and a critique of those who claim to follow God but instead pursue power and wealth.

EZEKIEL 34

Please turn with me in your Bibles to **Ezekiel 34**.

[Twitch stream announcement - **[Video: Minecraft]** and **[Image: Twitch]** **both probably best full screen if possible* - this Wednesday, Oct 28 at 5pm]

For a bit of background, Ezekiel was a prophet right around the time of the **fall of Jerusalem**, as the Israelites were taken into exile in Babylon. The people of God were being scattered all across the world. So Ezekiel's prophecies are full of warnings for Israel's leadership. Like this one:

Ezekiel 34:1-10

Then this message came to me from the LORD: Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds, the leaders of Israel. Give them this message from the Sovereign LORD: What sorrow awaits you shepherds who feed yourselves instead of your flocks. Shouldn't shepherds feed their sheep? You drink the milk, wear the wool, and butcher the best animals, but you let your flocks starve. You have not taken care of the weak. You have not tended the sick or bound up the injured. You have not gone looking for those who have wandered away and are lost. Instead, you have ruled them with harshness and cruelty. So my sheep have been scattered without a shepherd, and they are easy prey for any wild animal. They have wandered through all the mountains and all the hills, across the face of the earth, yet no one has gone to search for them.

Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: As surely as I live, says the Sovereign LORD, you abandoned my flock and left them to be attacked by every wild animal. And though you were my shepherds, you didn't search for my sheep when they were lost. You took care of yourselves and left the sheep to starve. Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD. This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I now consider

these shepherds my enemies, and I will hold them responsible for what has happened to my flock. I will take away their right to feed the flock, and I will stop them from feeding themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths; the sheep will no longer be their prey.

Whoa. These prophets don't mince words.

Ok, so in Ezekiel's time, God had given the responsibility of shepherding his flock - shepherding his people - to the leaders of Israel. And they failed miserably.

They were **corrupt**, living luxurious lives while the people struggled. Instead of defending the cause of orphans and widows, Israel's leaders allowed **injustice** to run rampant. And they didn't seem to care when **immorality** ran unchecked across the nation and the people suffered for it.

You can see why Ezekiel uses a metaphor here. The imagery is so powerful.

By painting the picture of a flock of sheep - lost and scattered and emaciated and terrified - while their negligent shepherds are gorging themselves on **lamb chops** and wearing brand new **wool jackets**, it evokes some pretty strong emotions, doesn't it?

And then there's this mic drop moment when God says he'll step in to do their job for them. Verse 10. "I will rescue my flock from their mouths; the sheep will no longer be their prey." Whoa.

Ezekiel's parable goes on. Look at verse 11.

Ezekiel 34:11-16

For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search and find my sheep. I will be like a shepherd looking for his scattered flock. I will find my sheep and rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on that dark and cloudy day. I will bring them back home to their own land of

Israel from among the peoples and nations. I will feed them on the mountains of Israel and by the rivers and in all the places where people live. Yes, I will give them good pastureland on the high hills of Israel. There they will lie down in pleasant places and feed in the lush pastures of the hills. I myself will tend my sheep and give them a place to lie down in peace, says the Sovereign LORD. I will search for my lost ones who strayed away, and I will bring them safely home again. I will bandage the injured and strengthen the weak. But I will destroy those who are fat and powerful. I will feed them, yes—feed them justice!

Again, whoa! Ezekiel is not messing around. **God himself** will rescue the scattered flock that Israel's leaders had failed so completely to protect.

Now fast forward to **Jesus telling his parable** of the lost sheep. It's a direct reference to Ezekiel 34.

Think about the context of when he told this story.

In Luke 15, the **lost and broken**, like the "sinners" Jesus spent so much time with, were being **excluded** from God's grace by the religious leaders. They were being condemned and judged by those in power.

In Matthew 18, the **vulnerable and the "least,"** like the child he puts in front of them, were not being honored. Instead, everyone was strutting around trying to be the greatest while the little ones - the poor, the sick, the insignificant - were **cast to the side**.

The sheep of Israel were being scattered yet again.

Do you see the connection he's drawing here? By telling the story of the lost sheep, Jesus is implying that God has had to step in to rescue his people yet again because the religious leaders had dropped the ball!

They had **misunderstood the nature of God's kingdom**, and just like in the fall of Jerusalem, they had bought the lie that wealth and power and comfort

and success were what it was all about.

So God himself is working to bring his scattered flock home.

This is why Jesus says multiple times, “I was sent to the lost sheep of Israel.” Why he calls himself the “**good shepherd.**”

Jesus is stepping in to make things right again - to bring the lost sheep home - to inaugurate a kingdom in which the last are first, the poor are rich, and the lost and forgotten are valued and protected and saved.

Yet again, the parables of Jesus are not just tidy morality tales. They’re **provocative invitations** to understand a kingdom unlike any the world has ever known.

I’m going to read the parable of the lost sheep again. Now listen to this with all of what we just talked about in mind. This time, we’ll read Matthew’s version.

Matthew 18:12-14

If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them wanders away, what will he do? Won’t he leave the ninety-nine others on the hills and go out to search for the one that is lost? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he will rejoice over it more than over the ninety-nine that didn’t wander away! In the same way, it is not my heavenly Father’s will that even one of these little ones should perish.

The good shepherd pursues the one lost sheep. God’s kingdom is for those the world has cast aside.

APPLICATION

Obviously, there’s a lot to chew on as we consider this parable of Jesus. If you’re like me for most of my life, until today you probably had no idea this small story of Jesus had so many layers of meaning.

So I encourage you to give it some more thought this week. This is a Bring

Your Own Bible series, so get your own Bible and read **Ezekiel 34**. And then read Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats in **Matthew 25**. And then go read what Jesus says about sheep in **John 10** or when he calls Peter to feed his sheep in **John 21**!

You'll start to see all these threads weaving together and I guarantee you'll start having a greater appreciation for these little sheep stories Jesus told.

By the way, I know I just threw a bunch of references at you. If you want to go and do some study on your own, I put all the references (and a few extras) in the app notes. Go for it! Do just a little bit of digging and your mind will be blown.

But for now, I think there are two big takeaways from this parable of the lost sheep that we should really consider today - in our lives.

First, just like the parables of the four soils from week one, or the mustard seed and the yeast from Amy's message last week, this parable is **an invitation to wrestle** with our own feelings about the nature of the kingdom of God - God's rule and reign in the world.

The big mistake of Israel's religious leaders - the reason the sheep were lost in the first place - was in thinking that **wealth and power and status** were things worth giving their lives to.

They imagined the kingdom of God was a place where they - the most godly and powerful of them all - would dominate everyone else.

They didn't understand the truth that God's kingdom is not built on success; **it's built on humility**. Remember the child Jesus puts in front of everyone? Here's what he said about the kid right before he told the parable:

Matthew 18:4

Anyone who becomes as humble as this little child is the greatest in the

Kingdom of Heaven.

That's why the good shepherd pursues the one lost sheep. Because **the kingdom belongs to those the world considers nothing**. Our king was crucified.

This is what we have to wrestle with. *Do we see God's kingdom in that way? Do we really believe God cares so deeply for those the world has rejected? That he would leave the 99 to go look for the one who is lost?*

Or even more provocatively: **Are we *joining* him in that search?**

Or are we just pouring out our lives for the kingdoms of this world? Money. Fame. Power. Success. Popularity. Influence. Stuff.

Are we looking for the lost sheep too? Or are we just wearing our **nice wool jackets**? Where are our priorities?

That's the first big takeaway. A question of whether we really believe that the kingdom Jesus preached about is one worth living for.

The good shepherd pursues the one lost sheep... will we?

The second big takeaway is far more **intimate and personal between you and God**.

Because the truth is, there are many of you who struggle a *lot* with your own self-worth. I know because you've told me.

You feel **small and unimportant**. You feel invisible in this world. You wrestle with your past - your mistakes - your sin. You think to yourself, "if people only knew who I really was, they wouldn't want anything to do with me."

Or maybe you're someone who is **crushed by the brokenness of this world**.

Struggling financially or suffering from abuse or your body or mind are unhealthy. You feel like an insignificant speck in a world full of success.

If any of that is you, I want to remind you of *this* truth:

The good shepherd pursues the one lost sheep... even you!

Remember, in the story this shepherd pursues the one lost sheep instead of focusing on the 99. To most people, a 1% loss in the flock is just **the cost of doing business**. But not to God. To God, that one lost sheep is worth everything. And so are you.

This is why Jesus **spent time with sinful** and broken people - why he touched lepers and spoke to women and ate with “sinners.” This is **why Jesus honored those who had no status** in his world. Because he loved them. And he loves you.

Just listen to the words of Jesus as he concludes this parable:

Luke 15:7

There is more joy in heaven over one lost sinner who repents and returns to God than over ninety-nine others who are righteous and haven't strayed away!

Matthew 18:14

It is not my heavenly Father's will that even one of these little ones should perish.

God has taken it upon himself to bring you home. It's why he sent his son, Jesus, to this earth in the first place. Why Jesus died *for you*.

Ezekiel 34:15

I myself will tend my sheep and give them a place to lie down in peace, says the Sovereign LORD.

Do you want to lie down in peace? Do you want green pastures and clean water?

Because the invitation is open. The good shepherd is looking for you. **Will you call out to him?** You're lost in the valley and you don't know your way out. Call out to him!

"Jesus I give my life to you. I'm lost and scared and alone. I'm done trying to do this on my own."

That's all it takes! The good shepherd is searching for you. Let him carry you home.

[PRAY]