

THE PARABLE OF THE LOST SHEEP // Luke 15:3-7

Message from the series, Lost and Found

The spiritual categories of lost and perishing must be understood together. The Greek word *apollumi* is translated in this passage as “lost.” In other places in the New Testament, it is translated as “perishing” as in Matthew 8:25 when the disciples ask Jesus to save them from the storm because they are perishing. Taking both meanings together, we recognize that anyone who has not experienced salvation through faith in Christ is lost and therefore perishing, in danger of hell. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10), and he demonstrates his love for the lost in the parables from this chapter of Luke.

Reading parables is like peeling an onion—there are several layers. The first layer is the narrative, which must be understood first in its first century context. Secondly, there is the moral or ethical layer—what kind of behavior is being prescribed in the text? Then, there is the theological layer—what is being said about the nature of God and the nature of humans in relationship to God? Finally, there is the Christological layer—what role is Jesus playing? Where is he in the parable?

In this parable, Jesus is the shepherd, and he interacts with the sheep in four ways:

- 1. Jesus counts his sheep (v. 4)**—The number of sheep is not significant, but the fact that Jesus knows the number is. He is eating with sinners and tax-collectors because he knows his sheep and he knows who is missing from his flock and he is going to find them. Scripture often points to God as a shepherd to his people (Isaiah 40:11, Psalm 23, Ezekiel 34, John 10:16), and God never loses his sheep—nothing can separate his sheep from the love of God.
- 2. Jesus calls his sheep (v. 4)**—Lost sheep are hopeless and helpless. They must be rescued. A shepherd with 100 sheep could possibly afford to cut his losses with a single sheep missing, but this shepherd does not. He risks his life, leaving the 99 behind, to go after the one missing. In the same way, Jesus came, giving up his life to die on behalf of his sheep. We serve a saving God.
- 3. Jesus carries his sheep (v. 5)**—The shepherd seeks his sheep until he finds it. And the condition in which the sheep is found does not matter. Scared, lonely, bloody, messy, the sheep is scooped up. The shepherd places him on his shoulders and carries him to safety. Here is an illustration of the cross—Jesus bearing our sin on his shoulders. Jesus is looking for you—do you want to be found?
- 4. Jesus celebrates his sheep (v. 6-7)**—The shepherd rejoices to find the sheep and carries it home with pleasure. We might imagine that to be found in our sin would incur the displeasure of Christ, that we would be met with anger, that he would insist that we get ourselves out of our mess—and we, in our pride, might imagine we prefer to walk on our own. But this is impossible. The only way to enter the flock is on Jesus’ back—we cannot carry ourselves. It is not about who we are, but about who he is—and he is delighted to find us.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What can we know about the nature of God based on the fact that he never loses his sheep, that he seeks them until they are found?
2. In what ways are lost sheep and lost people similar? How is a shepherd an appropriate analogy for what Jesus does?
3. How does it feel to know that Jesus celebrates finding us and bringing us home? How could we respond to his joy?