

One Lost Sheep

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[0 : 00] This is the AM service on September the 21st, 1997. The sermon is entitled, One Lost Sheep, and is from Matthew chapter 18, verses 1 to 14.

The preacher is Andrew Pridot. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word and the Bible, and we thank you that you speak to us through it, and we pray that you would speak to us this morning and change us.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. When I was a bit younger than I am now, like most kids, I had all sorts of tricky ways of getting around what my parents wanted me to do, or all sorts of tricky ways of getting them to do what I wanted to do.

Sometimes I get what I wanted, but most of the time they were too clever for me. See, they knew me too well. They knew what I was up to as soon as I came up to them and started with that whiny voice, which I'm sure some of you know about.

Well, the disciples in this question, in this passage rather, are being a bit tricky. I think they're coming up to Jesus with a question that perhaps has a bit of a hidden agenda, and it's a question that shows that they still don't really understand who Jesus was, and what his kingdom, the kingdom of God, or in Matthew's Gospel, the kingdom of heaven, was all about.

[1 : 34] Listen to the question they ask. Who's the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Now, from some of the other Gospels, we know that around this time the disciples have been arguing amongst themselves as to who was the greatest amongst them.

And we also know that Peter, James and John were privileged to see this great appearance of Jesus in all his glory, what we call the transfiguration. So perhaps these disciples thought they were in with a bit of a chance, perhaps of snatching up the best portfolios in this cabinet or this kingdom that Jesus was talking about and setting up.

Perhaps they had in mind this view of Messiah still, whereby he would come into Jerusalem with a great army and oust the Romans and restore God's people to their proper place.

And maybe they thought, well, in this kingdom we're disciples of Jesus. Surely we could have a special position or place here. Well, Jesus doesn't let them enjoy their pipe dream for too long, and he shows them that they really misunderstand what it means to enter this kingdom of heaven that he was teaching about, let alone have any sort of place in it.

Listen to what he says. He called a child whom he put among them and said, truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

[3 : 06] Now, Jesus doesn't answer their question directly here, I think, because it's the wrong question. And the first thing that he says to them is that they must change. Literally, the word is to turn or convert.

That is, Jesus is looking for a complete transformation in their lives. Because the disciples' question betrayed the fact that they were on the wrong track.

It's not just the disciples, though, is it? I think by nature we're all a bit like this. Naturally, perhaps we think we're in with a chance with God. Surely he'd be pretty happy, if not impressed with the kind of lives that we lead.

Perhaps we might even think that God owes us something. Well, Jesus goes on to show that God is no one's debtor. Listen again to what he says in verse 3.

Truly I tell you, and that means, this is important, guys, listen up. Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

[4 : 09] Now, why children? It might be obvious that we need to change, but why like children? We said at the start that the disciples were acting like children, very childish, sort of, I'm better than you are, na-na-na-na-na, that sort of thing.

And the word Jesus uses here is for little children. What could he be talking about? How could being like a child qualify you, if you like, for entering this kingdom?

Or perhaps he's talking about innocence or purity. But let me ask you, have you ever met a child who is innocent or pure?

I've got this theory that they don't actually exist. I tell you, when I was a kid, I was a horrible kid. My grandparents thought I was wonderful. You know, the first grandchild, butter wouldn't melt in his mouth, and I'd turn up every two weeks and, you know, they'd think, oh, what a nice little boy Andrew is.

But mum and dad knew that I had them well and truly full. They knew, they saw the things that they didn't see, that I chucked a temper tantrum in Safeway, but didn't get the golden book I wanted, or that I hit my brother over the head with a cricket bat when he wouldn't give me a go at hitting or whatever it was in cricket.

[5 : 24] Or once in front of school, I held my breath till I fainted because I wasn't allowed to go to somebody's house after school or something like that. I mean, the reality is, I'm sorry to tell you, that if you think your kids are pure and innocent, then they've got the wool pulled over your eyes.

There's no two ways about it. Well, what then does Jesus mean then, if he doesn't mean innocent and pure? Well, it must be the opposite to what the disciples are doing in verse 1, at any rate, laying claim to positions perhaps, believing they've got a good credit balance, an impressive resume before God.

Now, children have none of these things, do they? They're helpless. They're entirely dependent on the goodwill of adults to care for them, to look after them.

And in the ancient world, this was even more the case. There was no such thing as child welfare, no protection from the state or anything like that. Now, a child in the ancient world was completely helpless and dependent, again, on the goodwill and kindness of their parents or guardians.

I think this is what Jesus is saying here, that this is how we must come to God, not believing we have something to bring, in a way, but to come with a desperate, dependent trust on Him for everything we need.

[6 : 46] Helpless, coming to Him. A desperate, dependent trust. All those things I was talking about that characterise childishness, greed or petty rivalry, pride, bad temper, whatever it is, if we're honest with ourselves, I think we know that these aren't things we grow out of.

My brother grew out of asthma. Some people grow out of asthma. These aren't things, I think, that ultimately we grow out of. We just find more sophisticated ways of doing them, don't we? More polite ways of being greedy or proud or whatever it is.

I don't try to hit my brother over the head with a cricket bat anymore. He's bigger than me. I wouldn't even attempt to do it. But I can cut him down with an unkind word. See, the only thing we bring to our relationship with God in the end is sin.

And that's why faith is not something that we bring to God in exchange for His acceptance for us, but rather empty hands held out, asking God to fill them.

Yes, Jesus says, a change is needed whereby we respond to God and the news of His kingdom in the gospel with the trust of a child, with the desperate, dependent trust of a child.

[8 : 05] And indeed, if we begin this way in the Christian life, this is the way we go on living the Christian life. It is humility and not pride that should characterise the Christian for this reason.

Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Very different kingdom from the kingdoms of the world, isn't it?

When you think about it, this is a big challenge to us, to trust God with our lives in this way. I look around and I see a church full of very competent people, well-qualified, skilled, respected, strong families and friendship groups.

But can these things keep us in good stead for eternity? Listen to how Jesus describes being a disciple a bit earlier in this gospel, in chapter 16.

He says that if anyone would come after me or be my disciple, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. Now, if you took up your cross in the ancient world, you were only going to one place and that was the place of your execution.

[9 : 16] It was the cruelest form of Roman capital punishment. You were going to your death if you were carrying your cross. And at least part of what Jesus is saying here is that when we become his disciples, we die to having ourselves at the centre of our lives so that our confidence or our centre of security in life is shifted from us to God.

This kind of death means the beginning of a new life with God, one that goes on forever with him. It's a radical move.

Far easier, I think, to depose a prime minister or a king from power. All you need is enough people to vote them out or an army. But for this kind of dethronement, the power of the Holy Spirit is needed and nothing less.

Well, we might ask the question, this is a very radical trust to have, this is a radical thing to do to hand our lives over to God.

Can this God be trusted? And sadly it was just as true then as it is now that not all parents or guardians were worthy of such a complete trust on behalf of the children.

[10:30] And it might be a fair question to say, again, well can we trust God in this way? Well, if we keep reading this passage, I think we'll find at least two reasons why we can.

And the first comes in verses 5 to 9. And the first one is because God hates sin. God hates sin. That might seem like an odd reason, but bear with me.

Well, sin, what's sin? It's the very opposite to God's way of life. It's a way of thinking and acting and being that is lived independently from God. God isn't in the driver's seat in a life characterized by sin.

And it results inevitably in death and judgment. Listen to how Paul contrasts life with God to the life of sin in Romans 6 and verse 23.

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Now there's a lot at stake here, isn't there?

[11:34] It's no wonder that Jesus has some hard things to say about those things in the world which cause people to sin. And he calls them in this passage stumbling blocks, things which trip us up in pursuing this life with God, the enjoyment of this life that he died to bring us.

Let's read about what Jesus has to say. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.

Woe to the world because of stumbling blocks. Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to the one by whom the stumbling block comes. Now Jesus came to seek and save a people for eternal life with God.

Therefore, anything that threatens these little ones and they're the ones who've put their trust in Jesus, we learn in verse 6, anyone that threatens these little ones needs to watch out.

And in the first place, this is a warning to the world, isn't it? Jesus said, whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

[12:51] I wonder, how does the world welcome Christians? How does the television promote Christian life and encourage godly living or the newspapers or magazines for that matter?

Can we still claim to live in a Christian country when in religious education teachers are often forbidden from proclaiming the gospel openly and clearly?

Can we claim to live in a Christian country still when in a university tutorial in English? I remember that I could have argued from a Marxist perspective or a feminist perspective or even a New Age perspective.

But to argue from a Christian perspective, well, that was another thing. You're either laughed out of the tutorial or seen as a bigot or someone who is a bit strange. What about those teachers who claim to be Christians but take the heart out of the gospel, take the guts out of the gospel?

We've just had, maybe you saw recently, Bishop Spong on television again. I think he's made it his life's ambition to undermine Christian faith.

[13:58] A bishop who preaches against the resurrection of Christ, who condones homosexual marriage, who claims that the heart of Christianity is not about the forgiveness of sins but about being happy in yourself or something like that.

I'm not sure exactly what he does think the Christian message is. Well, it's easy to poke the finger at people in the public eye but we can all be guilty of putting stumbling blocks in the way of other Christians.

Do we talk about other Christians behind their backs and show by this perhaps to younger Christians that, well, it's alright to gossip as a Christian, that that's just part of life and we all do it, it's okay.

Or are we proud of our own so-called achievements as Christians and look down at others who don't seem to be making the grade as well as we do?

Or more positively, do we encourage people to be confident in God's word? Or do we discourage such childlike trust as simplistic and a bit fundamentalist or something like that?

[15 : 04] Well, Jesus is realistic about the presence of sin in the world. He's the greatest realist. He lived amongst us.

He wept over Jerusalem because God's people didn't recognise their Lord when he'd come to them. He wept at the tomb of his friend Lazarus because sin and death were so much part of this world in which we live.

Do we mourn this sin in the world with Jesus? Or do we encourage it? Well, if Jesus is a realist, he's certainly not a defeatist.

His attitude is not, well, boys will be boys, or nobody's perfect. No, anything that threatens these little ones' enjoyment of this life with God must be radically rooted out.

We read in verses 8 and 9, if your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It's better for you to enter life maimed or lame than to have two hands or two feet and to be thrown into the eternal fire.

[16 : 14] And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out and throw it away. It's better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into the hell of fire.

strong words. Jesus calls a spade a spade. I think he expects his followers to do the same, to call name sin for what it is and to be rid of it.

If you find out that your life is even threatened by cancer, you won't wander around about it or hope that everything will turn out right. You seek medical attention, you do something about it, this is serious, it needs to be rooted out before it spreads.

You can't just talk about a little bit of it and it's okay. And I think that Jesus is saying the same thing about sin here and he uses very powerful metaphors to point to that reality that he's calling Christians to.

Of course he's not speaking literally about self-mutilation or something like that, but the underlying point is as clear as day. We know those things that cause us to stumble.

[17 : 23] Jesus says we can't afford to flirt with these things. We can't afford to entertain those thoughts which distract us from following God. We know where we're prone to sin, we know what those stumbling blocks are and we know the stumbling blocks we put in the path of other people and Jesus says be rid of them, root them out, take them seriously like God takes them seriously.

Now if Jesus mourns over our sin because he sees how destructive it is, he is also realistic about God's judgment.

And this isn't the most popular thing to talk about, but again we don't have to read the Old Testament to find that God is real about judgment. God's eternal anger against sin is real. Hell is not the figment of our imaginations. And Jesus gives us a pretty good incentive here for avoiding sin. What's the point of holding on to sin that promises so much for us now when it threatens so seriously our future enjoyment of God's blessings?

Well I said at the beginning of this section that the fact that God hates sin is one reason that we can trust in him. And you might say well why is that? I think it's fantastic that in a world that often calls good evil and evil good we can know the God of truth who wants to change us, who doesn't want us to be slaves to sin, a God who wills, who doesn't tolerate evil, who wants to see justice ultimately done.

[19 : 10] I think it's a loving God who doesn't turn a blind eye to that which hurts and destroys us and threatens our relationship with him, who wants us to be whole, who wants us to enjoy his life, eternal life, the life of the kingdom of heaven.

But if God is a God who judges sin, he is also a God of grace. He is a seeking and saving and forgiving God.

God. Now again, in the first place, Jesus is addressing these words to Christians. He is reminding them of the kind of steadfast love that God has for his people.

I think it's sometimes easy to feel that we are really quite insignificant in the bigger scheme of things, that we don't matter much.

It's also true that not all of us have had families who have loved us unconditionally and worked for our best interests. Perhaps even in the household of God, in the church, we have felt insignificant.

[20 : 18] Everybody else seems to have the gifts. Everybody else seems to be rushing around doing all the important things. Everybody else seems to have the strong faith.

Or maybe the opposite is true of us, that we feel we're in a position to take pride in ourselves and look down on other Christians. Let's listen again to what Jesus has to say about these things in verse 10.

Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven.

Now these words about the angels have got people who write on these passages working hard. It's perhaps difficult to understand, but one thing at least is clear, that is that these messengers of God, that's literally what they are, who are obedient to God's purposes in the world, are always in God's presence.

And of course, this is the hope of Christians that one day we will be in the immediate presence of God for eternity, enjoying him forever. And Jesus is saying that in this highest place where the angels are, that every child of God is considered precious in his sight.

[21 : 36] What a wonderful thing. And see how he fleshes this out in the next few verses, the kind of love that God has for his children. What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?

And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. In the puppet play we heard about a party, a great celebration in heaven, and I don't think that that's an exaggeration.

I think that that's quite clear from these words, that God's desire to see people come back to him, come back into his fold, is something that is celebrated in heaven.

And this idea of God seeking out lost ones, I think, is not often how we view our God. Sometimes we talk about making a decision for Christ in the context of an evangelistic meeting or something like that.

And while this is true, that a response of faith is needed, it can sound a bit like, well, God's sitting around waiting for us to find him and to attach ourselves to him as if it's all up to us.

[22 : 54] But this is not the God of the Bible. The God of the Bible from beginning to end is a proactive God who is active in history, drawing out a people to himself and keeping them close to himself.

Jesus described his own mission as one in which he came to seek and save the lost. And that image of being lost and found here is spoken about again in terms of the shepherd and his sheep. And isn't it amazing that in the reality, in the face of our sin, which we've just been talking about, which we can't deny, God is determined to bring us back.

Now maybe the farming imagery here isn't as true to the 20th century as it was then, but certainly then it was true that a shepherd would lay down his life for one sheep that had gone astray to bring them back to the flock.

And all of us, no doubt, at different points in our lives have gone off track if we're Christians in the Christian life. Sometimes we can even stay away from God's family, the church, for years.

[24 : 04] Maybe that was true of you, I'm not sure. But did you know that the very fact that you're at church this morning, gathering with God's people, is a testimony to God's determined love to keep you?

I don't read in the newspaper that I should go to church. It's certainly not something that I people at work might encourage me to do, but the fact that I'm here is a testimony to God's determined love to save for himself a people and to keep them.

And I think this is ultimately where our assurance comes from as Christians, that the God who has sought us out and saved us is a God who keeps us safe to the end.

Now while it's true that these verses are aimed at those who, as it were, are in the flock, in the church, if you like, I think it's also relevant to those of us who aren't, those of us who haven't trusted in Jesus, who aren't yet Christians.

God is seeking these people out too. In John's Gospel we see how determined Jesus, the Good Shepherd, was to save these people.

[25 : 21] He says, I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. This is the Good Shepherd who dies in our place on the cross, taking our sin and the punishment

we deserve so that we might have a fresh start with God, so that we might become his children.

Perhaps we've never responded to that invitation before. And we might say, well, how do we respond? Well, once again, we're back where we started, in verse three.

Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. A child has nothing to offer God for God's acceptance of them.

A child simply comes, remember, with that desperate dependent trust. love. And I think that this is what Jesus is saying and this is how we respond to this kind of love.

With the kind of prayer that might say, Father, I have nothing but sin to bring to this relationship. In Jesus, you've promised to take away my sin and bring me new life.

[26 : 38] Please do these things for me. and he will answer that prayer. Well, in closing, the disciples betrayed worldly values at the start of this passage, didn't they?

And they showed through their words where their true confidence lay. In another place, Jesus encouraged the disciples not to rejoice because of their many great things that they were doing in his name, but because their names were written in heaven.

And this is the true source of our hope and the only true source of hope and confidence in life, to know that our future is secure in that way.

let's pray that our lives might show such a desperate, dependent trust in God and that by his powerful love, we will stand firm to the end and so face eternity confidently.

Let's pray. Our gracious heavenly Father, we thank you that in Jesus you are the seeking and saving God.

[27 : 51] we thank you that although we have sinned, that you have died so that we can be forgiven and have a new chance to live for you. Father, each of us is on a different part of this road in trusting you and living the Christian life, but wherever we are, heavenly Father, I pray that you would guide us, bring us to true and complete faith in Jesus, help us to be rid of that which stops us from following you in our lives.

And please keep us safe to the end. For Jesus' sake we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Come on. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.