

Gracious Determination

Matthew 18:10-14

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We come this morning as we continue in this series on parables of the kingdom to a parable that isn't about the kingdom. It's about the nature of the kingdom. How do we describe the character of this kingdom? I would so go so far as to say that this parable is about the core of the kingdom and of the king of this kingdom. And it is His grace.

Good news this morning. It's also a two for one because it has a wonderful parallel in the gospel of Luke. And while it's not going to be on the screens, I'll read it for free.

Perhaps you were into literature growing up. Maybe you were into poetry. In that process of enjoying poetry, perhaps you read Emily Dickinson, a fine poet. One of the things that Emily Dickinson once said was that "To tell the truth, but to tell it slant." Perhaps you've heard that quote. If you have, unfortunately, that's not the only part of the quote, although that's generally what is remembered. She says more than just "To tell the truth, but to tell it slant." She actually then explains why that is the case. And here's what she says. "Tell the truth, but tell it slant. The truth must dazzle gradually, or every man be blind."

Jesus uses parables to declare the truth of His kingdom. And that truth dazzles gradually, lest we all go blind. Jesus does not use the truth like a hammer, but more like a scalpel. And what He does with this scalpel is He goes to the very core of who we are in our hearts and the reality of our existence as human beings before a holy God. But also, it goes to the core of the gospel, the gospel of grace.

Hear now this parable drawn from Matthew 18:10-14, and then I will read the parallel from the gospel of Luke. Hear now God's word.

"See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven. What do you think? If a man 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 say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish."
[ESV]

And then from the gospel of Luke 15.

"What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Pray with me.

Heavenly Father, we now ask that you would open our very souls and our hearts and our minds to the glory of the gospel of grace, the heart and character of the kingdom, and what we find there is a king in His gracious determination to seek us out. Help the teacher. In Jesus's name. Amen.

As we look at this parable together, I want to remind you of something that we've already sung this morning. We sang a song earlier this morning. The song is titled, "His Mercy Is More." And these words we sang together over and over again. "Stronger than darkness, new every morn. Our sins, they are many. But his mercy is more." His mercy is more.

This past week, I had to share what I think is the source verse of that part of that song, Lamentations 3, with friends whose son in his mid-20's passed away. They have experienced the trial and darkness of loss. Some of you are experiencing loss or darkness. Some of you may not even know who Jesus is. Some of you know Jesus but have forgotten that the glory of the gospel is in His determination, not in our performance.

Let's remind ourselves again of what we've sung. "Stronger than darkness, new every morn. Our sins, they are many. But his mercy is more." His mercy is more. God's gracious determination this morning is to show us again that His mercy is more.

We want to see this this morning from the vantage point of this parable which is all about the shepherd. And what do we learn about this shepherd? We learn two things about this shepherd. One, his commitment to lostness and his celebration of foundness. I know that's not a word, but there you go. Commitment to lostness, but celebration of foundness.

First, as we look at these two parables which are parallel to one another, let's look first at this commitment to lostness because it seems to be the overwhelming driving element of both of these parables. And in fact, in Luke it is followed by another parable which is the parable of the lost coin. And what we find here is the commitment to lostness in both the parable of Matthew and Luke and what Jesus is trying to teach us. First, we must understand what is meant by the word here "lost."

What we have here in Matthew and Luke are two different contexts. The first context we see in Matthew is that there is a flock, but there is a sheep that has gone astray. Now, that makes sense in the context of Matthew because the way Matthew places it, it's just after Jesus is teaching about one of these little ones, that if anyone causes one of the little ones to stumble, meaning not able to come to Him or to fall away from Him, better that they have a millstone tied around their neck. This is not good news for any who cause any little ones to stumble.

But what's also interesting is that when Jesus comes here to this part of the parable, He says, "if one of these," meaning one of these little ones, goes astray. So, the context of Matthew is of a sheep that has strayed.

Now, in Luke, it's not necessarily about one who has strayed, but it's one that is lost. But it's easy to try to press the distinctions between the two, but the two are getting at the same thing. A sheep that has gone astray that is on its own is as good as dead. Same as the case of the one who is lost. The sheep that is lost is as good as dead. So, it's this idea of lostness.

But let's understand, first, what is meant by this word "lost" in both contexts. In the verb form, "lost" means to destroy, to do away with. But in this passage and in other passages throughout the gospel of Matthew like Matthew 7, Matthew 10, and Matthew 16, this means spiritual disaster. So, the nature of the sheep, whether they've gone astray, or they are lost, what we find is the pronouncement is as good as dead. It is spiritual disaster unless it is recovered.

What's also interesting as we read it here is it says, "What do you think? If a man 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?" So, the way in which this is phrased in Matthew as well as in Luke is it sounds as though one that has gone astray or one that is lost, and the shepherd just goes in search. It's almost like it might happen or it might not. But the way it works in Greek and in the original, it's not "if" he finds it, but the emphasis is on he "gets" to find it. The emphasis on success of the search. When looking for his sheep, regardless of how they got there are as good as dead. And when the shepherd searches for them, the mission will be completed.

Now, let's deal with this just for a minute. Only in Matthew, what we find here is "See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven." Now, that verse has served as a source verse for those who try to defend the idea of guardian angels.

Here's the good news. I have no idea. Here's the bad news. It doesn't seem that this text alone can carry the weight of a single doctrine that says each and every person in the world has a guardian angel. Yes, there are Old Testament parallels or, at least, allusions to such angels, but not necessarily if you press it in the Greek or in the Hebrew or in the Aramaic does it seem to suggest that every single person has one angel. It could be argued that the way in which the Greek is used here is that the angels represent or at least herald the nature of the lost ones, of the little ones, in heaven as a group, not necessarily as individuals. But I don't want to spend too much time on that. But that all is to say it's not as though the lost sheep regardless of how they got there are going to be okay because God has sent about a guardian angel to be with them.

Now, what I will say is this. Too oftentimes in the modern world and particularly within Presbyterian circles, we still think in this dualistic idea which is enfleshness and spirituality, that there is a spiritual otherworld and then there is the enfleshed world. And we generally have a strong wall or thick door that is closed. But the realities are, whether you believe in guardian angels or not, there is a sense in which the scriptures are very clear that there are angels and there are demons. And this world is porous. There isn't any such thing as a strong door or a tall wall. God is actively at work in the world in ways we cannot see.

This I do know that those who are children of the Lord God and receive the Holy Spirit, that is God present with us. The whole angel thing, that's up to Him. That's way above my pay grade. But the Holy Spirit He has told us we have. So, I think that's good enough. But I think what's being said here, I would argue on the side that the angels represent the whole, not necessarily individually. But for another sermon someday not in the near future.

But the emphasis here is you have lost sheep, one that's gone astray or one that is simply lost. They're as good as dead. And they are spiritually in a place of disaster unless they are recovered.

But then not only is it a commitment to lostness, but isn't this a beautiful thing that what God is about doing is recovering that which is lost? Now, we might want to say here that in this particular parable, He seems to draw a parallel. The pursuit of the lost one leaves the 99 to be exposed. And He goes further to say the shepherd rejoices over the one that is found as opposed to the 99 who never went astray. We might want to ask who's the audience here? Where do we fit? Are we who are believers a part of the ones that never went astray? That would wreak havoc with biblical theology with regard to sin and lostness for all have gone astray. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

So, what we're doing here is we don't need to press the metaphor too far to try and decide who is and who's not a part of the 99. The whole emphasis is God is about and committed to lostness. And guess what we do in lostness? We're lost. We do nothing. We have not sent up red flairs. It doesn't seem like the sheep has tried to phone home. It has not sent word by other sheep. It's lost. It's not asking for help. It's not even expecting for the shepherd to come and get it. It's lost. That gives you a sense for which God is committed to lostness.

And He's not committed to our self-professed righteousness. We cannot appeal to Him that we deserve to be found. God's committed to lostness, not to human pride that says, well, you might want to pick me on the team. No. He pursues.

And then in the Luke passage, what's interesting is it brings up this whole other aspect. And it says this, that when He has found the sheep that is lost, it seems to be that there is joy in heaven over the one sinner that repents than over the 99 righteous persons who need no repentance. So, it enters in this whole idea of the shepherd is rejoicing over the one that has repented. It seems as though, if we pressed

it, that what's being talked about here is the Lord sought it because it repented. But that's not what it says at all. It's not that the sheep repented and then God went out and found it and recovered it. No. It's very clear that the repentance, which literally is a compound word in Greek with one meaning "after" and the other is "thought," meaning it's a response to something that has already happened, that the repentance happens only at the point of being found. Thanks be to God it's not dependent on our ability to repent before the shepherd gets there.

God's committed to our lostness. And all that's required to come to the table is not our repentance but His grace. His grace first admits us to the table. And it's the grace that changes us. It is the grace that brings about repentance. Then we see what's required to sit at the Lord's table is not our lostness, not our repentance, but His grace alone as one writer said. It is all about His grace because, again, it would wreak havoc with the doctrine that Paul teaches in Romans 5:8, "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Do you hear the elements of that woven into what Jesus is teaching here? God came to us in our lostness. "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

But here's the crazy thing. I think this reality of being lost and in need is precisely the location where we begin to experience why we need Jesus. When we get to the end of ourselves, our own wisdom, our own understanding, our own plans, our own education, our own right decisions, when we get to the end of those and life still doesn't add up the way we thought it would, I think there is precisely where we begin to experience why exactly we need Jesus. Sometimes God allows us to go to the end of ourselves, and only once we get there can we sing, as Leonard Cohen once wrote, "a cold and broken halleluiaah."

Are you familiar with that song? Consider what Leonard Cohen said regarding this song which was very unexpected from him. Leonard Cohen never professed overtly religious themes in much of his music. Even with a Jewish upbringing, it doesn't come strongly through his music. But this song shocked everybody in the recording room. He showed up, was ready to do it, and people were scratching their heads. And when asked about it, this is what he said.

"This world is full of conflicts and full of things that cannot be reconciled. But there are moments when we can transcend and reconcile and embrace the whole mess. And that's what I mean by 'hallelujah,' that regardless of what the impossibility of the situation is, there is a moment when you open your mouth and throw open your arms, and you embrace the thing, and you just say 'hallelujah,' blessed is the name. The only moment that you can live here comfortably in these absolutely irreconcilable conflicts is in this moment when you embrace it all, and you say, look, I don't understand at all. Hallelujah. The only moment that we live here fully as human beings."

Now, I don't believe Leonard Cohen was a Christian, but he's beginning to get to the very depths of what it means to cry hallelujah, blessed be the name of the Lord. We get to the end of ourselves as human beings and we realize you and I do not know what the next hour will bring. And only in our self-deceived foolishness do we believe we go about life in our own well-dressed-up ways. And we think we know what is going to happen. But the scriptures keep telling us, nope. You are lost, and in your lostness, my grace is on display. And what is required of us but to simply sing hallelujah, blessed be the name of the Lord?

I don't know if that offends you that his whole idea that what Jesus is talking about here is that we are lost and in need of recovery and of redemption. Jesus considers you and I to be lost and in need of redemption and recovery. Does it make you feel uncomfortable? Does this feel like judgement to you? And I would imagine that for some of you if not many of you, it does.

But here's a crazy little thing about our modern lives. Think about how many times we put ourselves every day on judgement day. We want others' approval. We want to get that like. We want to get that access. We want to be recognized. We want to be loved. And we put ourselves on display in hopes that we might be received and loved. That's a judgement day without the hope of grace. And yet,

Jesus says here, in our lostness, grace is never in doubt. “Stronger than darkness, new every morn. Our sins, they are many. But his mercy is more.”

But I want to be clear here. There is nothing deep about being lost. There is nothing particularly intellectual about it. It just is. There’s nothing redemptive. There’s nothing worth saying other than, I have no idea. I’m lost. But okay. That’s just a statement. It might be honest, but it doesn’t get us anywhere. We don’t revel in our lostness. What we’re reveling in here is something which might be easy to skip over.

Not only is the shepherd committed to lostness. What does it say? The celebration of foundness. What is deep is that God rejoices. Notice what it says. It’s beautiful. If a man leaves a hundred sheep and goes to find the one that’s gone astray, “And if he finds it, truly,” when Jesus says that, “Truly, I say to you,” our ears need to perk up. He’s getting ready to say something that’s even bigger. He says, “Truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray.” And He then leaves the metaphor completely and says, “So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.” He just left the metaphor and brought us straight into the heavenly realms of His Father. And what does He say? I as the shepherd, my Father who is the great shepherd, rejoice over you.

Then we hear the same thing in Luke when it says in verse 6, “And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, ‘Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.’” So, it’s not just God Himself rejoicing. He’s calling all of His people which if we peer into the parable are all the other lost who have been found and are now enjoying it with the Father. He brings all of them together and says, see, look what I have done. I have found the one. God is committed in the celebration of foundness.

But we must take a break to say isn’t this interesting that God decides, and Jesus decides to focus on the fact that God is the shepherd and that He is the shepherd? As one writer said, “Shepherding work is hard work. It’s tedious, unnoticed, and unforgiving. Shepherds sleep with the sheep, and they smell like the sheep.” And no one I have ever read about or heard, no one ever goes on vacation to go shepherding. You go on vacation to go hiking. You go on vacation to go fishing. You go on vacation to do whatever you do. But my guess is probably no one here ever says, you know what I want to do? I want to go sleep with some sheep.

But the beautiful power of this is that precisely in this season, we celebrate the incarnation. Jesus as the great shepherd has come to the sheep pen of the world. And He took on human flesh, and He slept with the sheep. He smells like the sheep. It was tedious, largely unnoticed, and when it was, it was unforgiving. And Jesus went to the cross for His shepherding. Things don’t end up well for the shepherd. And yet, this is the nature of this shepherd. And this is the root and the heart of the gospel.

As John tells us in his gospel when Jesus says,

“My sheep hear my voice and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. And no one will snatch them out of my hand. My father who has given them to me is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of my father’s hand. I and the father are one.”

What is He saying? He’s saying the Father is a shepherd, Jesus is a shepherd, and Jesus comes, sleeps with the sheep, smells like the sheep, and yet was innocent of sin, and died for the sake of the sheep. Why does He do this? Because for the joy set before Him.

Do you see how the narrative action of the parable moves? It moves from the lostness to the foundness to the celebration. For the joy set before Him, Jesus endured the cross. God is all about rejoicing that His children are found and brought back together with Him and reconciled. How glorious, how beautiful are the feet of Him who brings the good news, that Jesus is declared in the scriptures as the great shepherd of the sheep sent by the Father to rescue and redeem.

This means that we don't rejoice and look for deepness and intellectualness in being lost. We don't try to get a ticket into God's kingdom by saying, well, I realize my lostness, but now I'm found. I realize the error of my ways. No. He will have none of it. In our lostness, He's committed to it. He comes. And then we respond. And then we realize He's already responding ahead of us. He puts us on His shoulders. He takes us back home, and He calls all of His friends. And He says, rejoice with me. That is where we can say hallelujah because that means it is not dependent on anything we can do. But it is all God's gracious determination.

This is the work of God's kingdom. This is the core of the kingdom itself, the character of this kingdom. It is grace and grace alone.

I finish with the writer Robert Farrar Capone when he says,

"When God pardons, when he rescues, therefore, he does not say he understands our weakness or makes allowances for our errors. Rather, he disposes of, he finishes with the whole of our dead life and raises us up with a new one. He does not so much deal with our derelictions as he drops them down the black hole of Jesus's death. He forgets our sins in the darkness of the tomb. He remembers our iniquities no more in the oblivion of Jesus's work. He finds us, in short, in the desert of death, not in the garden of improvement. And in the power of Jesus's resurrection, he puts us on his shoulders rejoicing, and brings us home."

This is God's gracious determination. And as we prepare our hearts to come to the supper this morning, do you know you are invited because of God's gracious determination through His Son the Lord Jesus? And all He requires of you is to confess, Lord, hallelujah, blessed be the name of the Lord. Forgive me, for I am a lost sinner, and I can't do anything about it. And His grace goes before us and rejoicing in all of heaven that when we celebrate this supper together, heaven rejoices. Heaven rejoices not in us, but what God has done in His gracious determination. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we now ask that you would feed us, that you would encourage and strengthen us, that you would remind us again of our need of this rescue. Thanks be to God, it's not based on our performance. It is not based on anything other than what you have done. Thank you, O Lord, that your mercy is new every morning, and that though our sins are many, your grace is more. Thank you, Lord God, for coming to the sheep pen. Thank you, O Lord, that in our lostness, we don't have to despair. But we find the great shepherd who loves us, cares for us, and who brings us home. Help us, Lord, in our brokenness, in our sin, at the end of ourselves to be able to cry, hallelujah, blessed be the name of the Lord. In Jesus's name we pray. Amen.