

# One Lost Sheep

*Matthew 18:12-14*

A Sermon for Children

*With Study Questions*

*Pastor Paul Viggiano  
Branch of Hope Church  
2370 W. Carson Street, #100  
Torrance, CA 90501  
(310) 212-6999  
pastorpaul@integrity.com  
[www.branchofhope.org](http://www.branchofhope.org)  
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## **Introduction**

Recently I was sitting with my four-year-old, Gino, and he made an interesting request. He asked if he could cut all of his hair off. I asked him why. He said he wanted to be like me. Imitating people who we think highly of is a very biblical act. We are called to imitate those we see as godly (1 Corinthians 4:16; 11:1; 1 Thessalonians 2:14; Hebrews 6:12).

We would normally think of young people imitating older people for qualities they admire in them. But in the verses approaching the Parable of the Lost Sheep, we see Jesus telling grown-ups that they are supposed to imitate children – and *little* children at that!

In the beginning of this chapter we see the followers of Jesus arguing about who is the “**greatest in the kingdom of heaven**” (Matthew 18:1). They all wanted to be big-shots. So Jesus took one little child and “**set him in the midst**” of all these people who wanted to be greatest. You can imagine how a small child (probably a toddler) would be so nervous and afraid with everyone looking. Then Jesus said they needed to be humble (not think too highly of yourself) “**as this little child**” if they wanted to be greatest in God’s kingdom.

In the same way little children are dependant upon their parents for protection and food and clothing and comfort, grown-ups are to be humble and dependant upon God. The next thing Jesus says makes me wonder if the grown-ups hearing this ignored (or were maybe even mean) to that little child, especially when we read in the very next chapter about how little children were brought to Jesus...

**that He might put *His* hands on them and pray, but the disciples rebuked them. <sup>14</sup> But Jesus said, “Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 19:13, 14).**

Jesus, apparently, doesn’t like it when people ignore or are mean to His little children. So while these people, perhaps, were mean or ignoring this

little child, Jesus said, **“Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me” (Matthew 18:5)**. You know what this means – when somebody is mean to you, Jesus considers it the same as being mean to Him.

Two more quick things that Jesus says before He tells this parable: 1. Just in case they weren't getting the message that Jesus does not want people in His kingdom to ignore or be mean to little children He says something that would definitely get their attention:

**Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea (Matthew 18:6).**

And I thought I was protective of my children! Makes me think we need to be a little more careful about the way we treat little ones. Isn't it wonderful to know how much Jesus cares for you children?

2. And finally Jesus wants everybody to know how connected these little ones are to God – in the off chance that someone doesn't mind being thrown into the sea with a millstone hung around his neck, Jesus takes it a step further:

**Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven (Matthew 18:10).**

Sometimes we think of angels as little cherubs with a bow and arrow. But the Bible talks about angels who can stretch their hand out and destroy an entire nation (2 Samuel 24:16; 2 Kings 19:35). It seems that Jesus has made a strong point. He cares about the little children. By the way, this doesn't mean children shouldn't honor and obey their parents – that's a big deal to Jesus also (Mark 7:9, 10). This all led to this parable:

**What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them goes astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine and go to the mountains to seek the one that is straying? <sup>13</sup> And if he should find it, assuredly, I say to you, he rejoices more over that *sheep* than over the ninety-nine that did not go astray. <sup>14</sup> Even so it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish (Matthew 18:12-14).**

## Finding the Lost

In this parable we see something we've all experienced at one level or another. After being sick we're very glad to just feel normal. If we've lost a toy or a special blanket there is a momentary relief when we find them. One time one of my children lost their special bear and I had to search through the trash cans at Wilson Park in the dark to find it, which I did – what a relief! Sometimes parents misplace our wandering children, which is followed by nothing less than elation when they're found.

It is this mentality that Jesus is seeking to foster in His explanation of finding and restoring those who are spiritually lost. Going back to the way a parent's feel when a child wanders off and gets lost, there are other feelings which come into play; parents may get frustrated, angry, discouraged or heartbroken.

My wife and I experienced this years back when all three (at the time we had three) of our children went for a walk around the block and got lost. We had all sorts of feelings. But the over-arching and controlling disposition was to find them. We drove faster than we normally would, spoke to people we didn't know, interrupted conversations all in an effort to find the lost children, which we did – what a relief!

## No Shepherds

During the time of Jesus the leaders of the church had become very evil and they didn't care about the people and they didn't tell the people to trust and follow Jesus. This is what caused Matthew to write of Jesus,

**But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd (Matthew 9:36).**

When Jesus was about to go to heaven, He wanted to make sure that His people (and here He compares His people to sheep) had leaders in the church who would tell them about Him, about His love, His law, His cross, His rising from the dead – these things are like spiritual food for the sheep. This is why Jesus said to Peter, **“Feed My sheep (John 21:17b).**

And although there may be a primary application here to those in the ministry, we are all to participate in this – every last one of us.

**As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God (1 Peter 4:10).**

We are to imitate Jesus who “**for the joy (charas – same word used for the joy of finding the stray) that was set before Him endured the cross...**” (Hebrews 12:2) and pursued His ministry.

### **Who are These Little Ones?**

Who are these straying sheep and how are we to respond to them? The passage ends with these somewhat perplexing words:

**Even so it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish (Matthew 18:14).**

This is similar to what we read in Peter.

**The Lord is not slack concerning *His* promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9).**

Notice that, similar to Peter (“**longsuffering toward us**”), there are specific people that God has in mind (it is the near demonstrative “**these *touton* little ones**”). When God loves somebody or Jesus dies for somebody, it really makes a difference in their lives. If I tell my children I love them but then let them engage in self-destructive behavior, what kind of love is that!?

Who was Jesus pointing to when He said “these”? What if one of the little ones was home sick in bed or what if a wolf was lurking among the sheep? So who are these people? Who are the strays?

The strays are the little ones among God’s covenant people who are looked down upon due to their humble station in life. In a broad sense the strays are those who were among the covenant people of God who were led astray by the corrupt shepherds. These are people who were God’s people, going to a church that quit preaching about Jesus. We need to know that just

because a building has a cross on it or calls itself a church, doesn't mean it is truly a church.

## **Strays not Wolves**

The term “**goes astray**” from verse 12 *planethe* is passive and can be understood as “enticed to wander – especially from the truth.” Today it might be people who attend, or have attended, churches which teach falsehoods about Jesus. Jesus isn't really talking about people who say they don't believe in God or even people who have never heard about Jesus, but churched people who have been deceived to believe what Paul called “**different gospel**” (Galatians 1:6).

Even the word “lost” doesn't make sense unless you're describing something or someone who has been removed from their appropriate place. My wallet isn't lost if it's not my wallet in the first place.

The apostle Paul writes of this type of person along with how we ought to approach this person. Notice below that the term “**overtaken in any trespass.**” The term does not carry with it the idea of aggressively and rebelliously seeking to dishonor God with our thoughts or actions, but to be lured into sin and falsehood (this is not to downplay culpability but to discriminate between sins of outright apostasy and rebellion versus sins of weakness from which the sinner seeks to repent).

**Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who *are* spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness (prautetos – mild and pleasant friendliness), considering yourself lest you also be tempted. <sup>2</sup> Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. (Galatians 6:1, 2).**

James reveals the importance of addressing such a person.

**Brethren, if anyone among you wanders (planethe) from the truth, and someone turns him back, <sup>20</sup> let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins (James 5:19).**

## I Can't Do This

There is certainly a reason to rejoice when someone who never believed in Jesus comes to believe (Luke 15:10). But there is also a great joy when church people begin to fully grasp the grace of God. The parallels of this passage and our current culture are striking. I fear that sinners don't think there's a place for them in the church.

Years ago a young man called me and said he couldn't do this any more. "Do what?" I asked. "I can't be a Christian. I can't go to my church" He said. "I just can't live up to that standard." The young man (even though he tried to be faithful and repent when he did something wrong) didn't think he could be good enough to be a Christian. So let me ask you a question: was the standard in his church too high? Some churches, seeking to accommodate this feeling lower or alter God's standard to make it attainable to more people. But lowering the bar doesn't solve the problem; it merely moves it to another group of people.

No, the standard was not too high, it was too low. It was low enough for some people to keep but not him. The standard, a standard we should all strive for, is perfect obedience and, to be honest, is attained by Jesus only; through faith that perfect obedience is freely given to us – to sinners.

There is not a person so righteous that they can keep that standard and there is not a person so sinful that the blood of Christ can't wash that sin away. There is extreme joy in heaven when one sinner repents (Luke 15:10), but in this context the sinner is one who has already been exposed to a false picture of true faith but is yet unfamiliar with the grace of God in Christ. The faith Jesus exhorts us to, is a faith which appeals to the children and includes them and it is like them. It is a kind of faith which catches the ear of sinners and is a wellspring of peace and redemption.

John, writing to adults, calls them little ones and reinforces our comfort:

**My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. <sup>2</sup> And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world (1 John 2:1, 2).**

## Questions for Study

1. Who should we imitate if we want to be great in God's kingdom (page 2, 3)?
2. What does Jesus think about little children (page 3)?
3. Have you ever lost anything or been lost? What happened? How did it make you feel (page 4)?
4. What did Jesus want to make sure happened before He went to heaven (pages 4, 5)?
5. Who are the "little ones" that Jesus is speaking of (pages 5, 6)?
6. Discuss the nature of 'straying' in this passage (page 6).
7. How are Christians to restore those overtaken in a trespass (page 6)?
8. How does this passage apply to today's church (page 7)?