

We've been looking at the biblical theme of Sheep, Shepherds and Shepherding for about 6 weeks, and we're in the final weeks – just this week – the Parable of the Lost Sheep – and next week – with John 10, and "I am the Good Shepherd." And we've largely moved from Old Testament pictures and images to the New Testament's use of this theme. And I hope that's been as helpful to you as it's been for me, because this is where our study of those passages is going to pay off, because we need to keep up with one of Jesus' primary audiences for this parable of the Lost Sheep – the scribes and the Pharisees. These scribes and Pharisees, they are the church scholars and church leaders. And their academic specialty was what we call the Old Testament. In fact, unlike scholars today who have lots of books and computers, they couldn't carry their technology around with them everywhere they went, so they worked on memorization. They had large portions of their Old Testaments memorized.

Now, they were NOT villains or extremists. They were mainstream scholars. They were not the Essenes who were the super-fundamentalists who withdrew from culture and into monastic life. They also were not the Zealots, who were these radicals who wanted to use power and politics to overthrow the culture. They were also not the Sadducees – the mainline types who got rid of anything supernatural about their religion because they wanted to be respected and fit in. No, the Pharisees were the conservative scholars – in other words, the evangelical Presbyterians of their day.

Now remember, *Jesus* was a scholar. Yes he was a carpenter, but he'd been recognized as a *very* able teacher from the moment he picked up that scroll of Isaiah in the temple as a boy. He also had his OT memorized. He was also a Rabbi. He hung out with these scholars because was one, too.

The point is, as soon as Jesus, a Jewish scholar and rabbi, starts to tell a story that has sheep and a shepherd in it, his fellow scholars know exactly what he's talking about, and who is who. They know Psalm 23 and Jeremiah 51 and Ezekiel 34. They know that "the Lord is my shepherd" – so they know that God is THE shepherd, they know that the people of God are the sheep, and that God has given Israel under-shepherds. So with those same ears that we've learned to have these last 6 weeks, let's listen together to Jesus' words in Luke 15 – I've printed the text on your insert this week:

Luke 15:1-7 (“Shepherds and the Lost Sheep”)

<sup>1</sup> Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. <sup>2</sup> And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them.”

<sup>3</sup> So he told them this parable: <sup>4</sup> “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? <sup>5</sup> And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. <sup>6</sup> 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.’ <sup>7</sup> 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)

- The Lost
- The Search
- The Recovery
- The Party

Ken Bailey is a professor of Middle-Eastern New Testament Studies. He's 40 years living, researching and teaching in Egypt, Lebanon, Jerusalem, and Cypress, and his specialty is in reading the New Testament gospels through the eyes of a Middle Easterner. Bailey lived with, interviewed and studied active shepherds working in the Middle East and found out that – either because God has preserved this metaphor over the years, or simply because sheep are sheep – *very little* has changed with how shepherds do what they do over the last 2,000 years.

And the very first thing one of these Pharisees, one of these Bible school scholars, would have heard was this:

"What man of you, having a hundred sheep..." In other words, "What shepherd among yourselves..." and they would have been offended. First-century shepherds were generally despised by the average Jew, due to their reputation for lawlessness and dishonesty. Jesus, you see, puts the Pharisees in a bind: the Pharisees *naturally* would have tried to identify with the authority figure in this story, but would have balked when that figure turned out to be a shepherd!

Here is what Jesus is doing – he is saying that your world is upside down. You think that you have become authority figures, holy people, religious people... because you're *good* people. But by casting the so called good people as "shepherds" in the story, Jesus says the difference between these sheep and these shepherds is almost nothing. They are both lost.

Now I can't go into this – we don't have time – but you might get confused about how the rabbis – these Pharisees – managed to revere the shepherd of the Old Testament (YHWH) – and then actively despise the shepherd who herded their neighbors sheep. But they did. And so when Jesus tells the story, they simultaneously hear "authority figure" AND "lowly sinner."

And THAT is the point. Jesus is teaching that the Pharisees are just as lost and just as sinful, as the non-religious. That the Pharisees are guilty of using their religiosity and good works, their righteous good deeds, to get close to God. But, Jesus knows that when he preaches, it is the people who *know* they are sinners and *know* they are lost – they will respond to his message. But for these Pharisees it will be almost impossible for them. They will stay in their sin because they don't repent of their righteousness *as* sin. "It's not your sins, Pharisees, that separate you from God, it is your damnable good works that do it."

As Tim Keller says, "If Christianity is rightly understood and rightly proclaimed, it is the only religion in the world that religious people hate. And if religious people don't hate it, then it isn't being rightly proclaimed." It's not your badness, it is your goodness. It is not your moral failures, but your moral successes that keep you from God.

Now this is important because if you haven't heard this before, then you haven't really heard Jesus before, and you haven't fully understood Christianity.

A few times a year I hear from someone I meet – and I know this happens to you, too – that they have rejected Christianity because of the sins they see Christians committing.

Now, that IS a problem, but it also shows that they don't understand Christianity because while I should do good, I am not a Christian because I am now holy and perfect. What makes me a Christian is that even my *righteous* good deeds are tainted by sin, and I am always using them to protect me from God, and THAT is sin. And that I need Jesus because of my sin.

You know how you know you're lost?

You know you're lost when you think that if everyone just lived like I do, if only most of the people thought as I do, if only people behaved like I do, the world would be a better place. But it is that moralistic paradigm that will get you lost.

That is our first point. We are the lost. We are operational, functional Pharisees. We think we're good. But to really be a Christian, you need to know that you're lost.

- The Search

This parable has been criticized by many over the years: Why would someone, why would *any* shepherd, just leave the 99 who had followed their shepherd's voice, to search after the one who didn't, risking the lives of the 99 in the process?

That's why this story that Jesus tells works so well – because it mirrors the criticism and shock of the Pharisees over what they see Jesus doing in v. 2. Why would Jesus "leave" the safety and holiness of eating with his good friends, the righteous, and seemingly search out and *eat* with these people, these sinners?

In those days, Jewish children, after they turned 12 or 13 years old and did their bar mitzvah, they would join one of two groups. There was the *ha bu reem*, which means "the companions," "the friends." These *ha bu reems* were like local clubs in villages all across the holy land who sat around debating the finer points of the law. The members were still trades people, fishermen, and farmers, but they spent all their spare time on the nitty-gritty of the law, and how you'd apply it. But, if you decided, "No, that's not for me. I want to be a good Jew, but I have no time to mess with all of that scroll-study and debate stuff," then you became one of the *'am hā'āre* □ - one of the people of the land. You know, you go to synagogue whenever you can – certainly on the Sabbath – but you like your work, and you like to watch a ball game and have an adult beverage when you get home. You know, just different strokes for different religious folks...

Now remember, Jesus was probably part of the *habu reem*. He studied the scriptures with them. But his ministry – the people who were following him, interested in him, who trusted him – were the *'am hā'āre* □. (Jeremias quote from bulletin here)

And he knows exactly how the Scribes and Pharisees responded to this criticism. They said with pride, "No big deal. We *can* do business with these people of the land all day long, *as long as we eat our meals of ceremonial purity and only members of the club sit and eat with us*. No outsiders at meal time.

Now here is the thing: Jesus has probably been a member of their club for about 18 years at this point. That's where the shock comes from! And yet *he's eating* with these people of the land. How can he do this when he's been a member of the club? He's one of them, and yet he's not keeping the rules! He clearly IS being influenced by them.

And so Jesus tells them this story to show them that he is doing exactly what he should be doing, In fact, he's doing what THEY should be doing because the focus of any good shepherd is on the sheep who are lost.

That's what God is always doing, and that is what he has come to do – to search after the lost.

See, Jesus believes that sin is running from God. The lost sheep isn't merely wandering. The lost sheep is saying, "I want food and I don't need a shepherd to get it." Or, "I know better than the shepherd how to get it." This is why we need a shepherd. People think that the essence of sin is breaking the rules. But the thing is, we KNOW when we're breaking the rules. No, Jesus says the essence of sin is running from the God *behind* the rules. Some do it by pretending there are no rules, by denying, hiding from, running from God.

And others run from God, deny God, by *keeping* the rules. That's what Pharisees do, and that is what we do. It's how we get leverage over God.

You can escape God just as easily through religion and obedience as you can from irreligion and disobedience. And therefore God *must* search for you because you are blind to your sin.

- The Restoration

You know, we began this morning by talking about how these scribes and Pharisees knew their bibles so well, that they had vast chunks of what we call the Old Testament memorized. Why is this so important?

Because Jesus tells them a story using the foundational images of the Old Testament where he knows they will sit back and go, "Oh my. You mean, you, Jesus, a simple carpenter from Nazareth, you're going to line yourself up with the big boys? Like:

- David: "The Lord is My Shepherd."
- Ezekiel: "I Myself will search for my sheep."
- Jeremiah: "My people have been lost sheep. Their shepherds have led them astray"

And Jesus' answer is "Yes." but more than that, he is saying "I *am* the good shepherd."

I'd like you to look at the construction – really, it's a beautifully constructed, poetic parable, where even the construction teaches – that I put in your insert today:

- A. Which one of you
- B. one
- C. ninety-nine
  - 1. the lost
  - 2. find
  - 3. joy
  - 4. restoration (to home and friends)
  - 3'. joy
  - 2'. find
  - 1'. the lost
- A'. I say to you
- B'. one
- C'. ninety-nine

It starts out and ends in the same way. It starts out with Jesus talking to the Scribes and the Pharisees – the "you" ("which one of you...?"), and then to the "one," and then the "99." And then at the end, in his interpretation of his story, he again moves from "you" to the "one," and then to the "99."

And in the middle you have these recurring themes – the lost twice, the finding of the lost, the joy of finding and celebrating, and in the middle ... this is the climactic focus of the poetic construction of the story ... the restoration.

And this is critical. Because so many of us feel like we are beyond restoration. Our sins are so deep, and so long, and so continual, and our shame is so consistent, so crimson, so criminal, that we can't get out from under it. Every time we think about this, our question is, why? Why would God want me? Why would God love me? Most of all, why would God *save* me?

This is where the background that these scribes and Pharisees have is essential to us. I'd like you to flip back to Psalm 23:

It's so familiar, and it starts off so reassuringly:

- <sup>1</sup> The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
- <sup>2</sup> He makes me lie down in green pastures.  
He leads me beside still waters.

But then you get to verse 3, and there is just a hint that maybe there had been some trouble:

- <sup>3</sup> He *restores* my soul.

Or literally, "He brings me back." Or even, he causes me to repent. Because that great Hebrew word, *shuv* – meaning to turn around – is at the heart of the word repent or bring back.

You see, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm is really a story of a shepherd who goes out and *turns back, brings back* a lost sheep.

But the question we're asking is, why? Why should he? And the answer is there in the rest of verse 3:

"He leads me in paths of righteousness."

Obviously, this sheep had been going down the path of unrighteousness and needed to be turned around and led to the right track. Why does he do it? "For *his own name's sake*."

Now some of us don't like that God does things for his own glory. Or even that our chief end is to glorify God.

But think about this: We're not told that God restores the sheep because he loves it. We're told that he does it *for his glory, for his name*.

You see, thank God he doesn't do it based on what you've done, or how you feel about yourself. Your guilt, your shame, your worry would always tell you, "Of course he won't save you. Of course he won't restore you." Or because of your righteousness!

But the reality is that this shepherd takes his staff and hits the rock and says, "I never lost a sheep." He bangs it again and says, "My father never lost a sheep." And once again bangs that rock and says, "There is no way that on my watch I am going to return to that village and announce that I left there with 100 and came back with 99. I will not let that happen and become a mark against my glory."

Do you see how His glory is your grace? He goes after you, he searches for you, he forgives and restores you – not because of his pride – but because of his own inner integrity. "I am a shepherd that does NOT leave his sheep to die." Our God is a holy God who cares about his holiness, cares about his standards, and he goes after us for his own name's sake.

And this takes us to our last point. The party:

- The Party

There is an element to this story that is almost never discussed, and it's the joy, the party, over the lost sheep. And our outline shows us that the party happens first before, and then after the sheep is restored. There is obviously the party when the sheep is brought back home to the rest of the flock – we'll get to that in a minute. But in v. 5, just before the climax of restoration, the shepherd rejoices. Why?

It really makes no sense. A lost sheep, Ken Bailey says, "will lie down helplessly and refuse to budge." It will crawl under a bush or hide behind a stone and just Baaa-aaah – and you've got to get there in a hurry or wild animals will find it, kill it and eat it.

On top of that, in fear, a sheep's legs turn to rubber. They can't budge or even stand, so you can't push it, pull it, drive it or call it. The only way you're going to get it back to the village is if pick you up and carry this 75 pound animal across dangerous countryside.

Now friends, this story that Jesus tells is about nothing less than the nature and meaning of the cross.

Because what's so amazing is that this shepherd looks down on this sheep that will cause him to pay a heavy, back-breaking price, and *celebrates*.

"When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing."

You see, just as the shepherd – if he doesn't pay that price – will cause that sheep to die, *you* will die if Jesus does not pay the price for you on the cross. Jesus is talking about the life giving power of his costly love. He is explaining to his disciples and even his adversaries about just what kind of shepherd he is and how he will rescue and restore his sheep.

The party – the second party in v. 6, of course – is for the shepherd, not for the sheep. He doesn't say to his neighbors, "Hey, let's have a party and celebrate this wonderful sheep." He says, "Rejoice with *me*, for *I* have found *my* sheep." It's a party in honor of the Shepherd himself.

But don't miss this. Do you know how you feel when you hear about a party that you haven't been invited to? The pain of that? It's that very pain that Jesus is pressing on, when he tells this story to the Pharisees: Are you sure this is a party you're willing to miss?

Look at how he does it: Jesus starts by calling these smart, nerdy academics – the you – "shepherds." "What man of *you*, *having* a hundred sheep." *They* are the shepherds when the story begins. And what does the "you" do? They themselves *lose* the sheep. They're negligent. You had them, but then you lost one...

But then he describes a shepherd who **DOES** go after the one lost one – the Psalm 23 shepherd (and they would have called exactly that to mind!) – and this shepherd brings the lamb back and restores it.

What's Jesus' point when he gets to the party? I'm doing what you as shepherds are supposed to be doing. Sure, I'm doing something you never would by eating with these folks, but I am doing your job of restoration! You guys lost 'em, I'm finding them, and then when I do (and have a meal with them), you yell and scream at me for doing *your* job. What I'm doing, *you* should be doing – and you should be doing it all the more because you lost them in the first place! And in the end there will be rejoicing by God himself at the work I have done that you my friends should have done." Remember, they are all a part of the same club – the *habu reem*, "the friends" – so when Jesus says in v. 6 that the shepherd "comes home, he calls together his friends..." he saying, some friends you've been!

Jesus ends by saying, "I tell you" (In other words, now HE speaks as the "you.") "I AM the shepherd who tells you, that there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."

Now listen – listen for the very sad and very dry humor here – Jesus means the 99 *so-called* righteous who *think* they don't need to repent.

You see, God's party for his own namesake is for those who *know* they need to be found. Who *know* they need to repent. Who know they are the lost.

Will you acknowledge that you are lost? THAT is when there is a party. That is all repentance really need be. Acknowledgement that you ARE lost, and that as soon as you know you're lost and need to be found, Jesus puts your hide on his back. And the party is in heaven for HIS righteousness and you get to come into the party with him.

Do you see that? Repentance is not a work which you do, but repentance is the accepting that you are lost, and he carries the cost to make you found.

When I was growing up, the way I thought about this parable as a young child in Sunday school class was that I was one of the 99 safe ones. That there were 2 kinds of people: safe and sound people who are in church on Sunday mornings, and that we, as those safe sheep, were supposed to get out there and find that other kind – find that one person and bring them to God.

But that is not what Jesus is saying. Jesus says there ARE two kinds of people. Those who are sinners and lost, and they know it, and those who are sinners and lost and they don't know it.

Have you ever noticed that when we get to the cross, the Pharisees just... *disappear*? They will debate with him and argue with Jesus, until they realize he *can't* be one of them, and they do what they can to do him in. But when we get to the saving power of the cross they fall out of the story. Why?

Because they don't know they're lost! And because they don't know it, they aren't there for the party, the power of the Spirit! Jesus is saying to the Scribes and Pharisees, **you** are the 99, and you are so righteous that you don't need to repent – you see, *you think that you're not lost. You don't think you need a shepherd at all.* That is why there is no mention of the shepherd with them.

In the end, we know that the one sheep has made it home, but we have no news, no mention of the 99. See, Jesus says so much in what he doesn't say. When he gets to the end of the story he speaks of the party and the rejoicing when the lost sheep is restored and brought home, but they *can't* rejoice over the 99 because they haven't made it home yet!

Friends, Jesus did not come to call the well, the righteous, but the sick, and the sinner.

Friends, God has entered history to save his sheep and he IS calling. And think, too, about all of the times in scripture that the angels rejoice.

Probably the greatest event at which they have a party is when Jesus is born. They even descend from heaven and sing en masse the praises of God – glory to God in the highest.

But Jesus says that these angels in heaven will rejoice even more than at the birth of Christ – the party will be even greater – when one sinner is brought to repentance and faith in the saving work and shed blood of Jesus Christ. That's what Jesus has come to do? Are you lost?

Let's pray.