

My Misunderstanding of This Common Parable Caused Me Too Much Pain

My misunderstanding of the Parable of the Lost Sheep caused many of my most painful experiences in the ministry and unnecessary pain to those I served over the years. One of the most painful and difficult things for anyone who serves in the congregational ministry is when one of the people in your congregations falls away. When I speak here of people falling away, I am not simply speaking about people who leave a congregation because they are seeking something that will serve them or their family in a better way or because they found a significant biblical error being taught. I am writing about those who fall into sin or deception.

Many times these people are great people who have been a part of a community they love, and that loves them, but some type of crisis or trauma took place, which causes them to question their faith. Others may fall victim to charlatans, who prey like lions on those who have become spiritually weak with “direct revelation” or “conspiracy theories.” Especially in our new world of internet “experts” who with the use of video graphics and technology have become the snake oil salesmen of our day.

The loss of these people from our flocks can be traumatic as often strong relationships have been investing in over time. Because of the heart connections made between these people and the congregational leadership, we often go through extraordinary measures in order to get these sheep back into our sheepfold. While this may seem the right thing to do, these extraordinary measures cause more damage than they do good. Over the years, I have not had these situations fail to attract the lost sheep back into the fold, worse yet they have

caused a stampede of sheep that had remained in the fold.

After many heartbreaking experiences in my own ministry while reading a very familiar series of verses, I learned a lesson that changed the way I responded to these runaway sheep.

In Matthew 18 in between verse 9 (TLV): “If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out and throw it away from you. It’s better for you to enter into life with one eye than, having two eyes, to be thrown into fiery Gehenna.”

And verse 15: “Now if your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault while you’re with him alone. If he listens to you, you have won your brother,” we find what is known as the Parable of the Lost Sheep:

Matthew 18:11-14:

For the Son of Man has come to save that which was lost; “What do you think? If a certain man has a hundred sheep and one of them goes astray, won’t he leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go looking for the one that is straying? And if he finds it, amen I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that didn’t stray. Even so, it’s not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.”

This parable completely changed the way I viewed my responsibility for these runaway sheep. Especially, in line with the exhortation that follows it in Matthew 18:15-17.

As we look into this, let’s begin with verse 11, which tells us whose job it is to seek and save that which was lost. It is Yeshua’s (Jesus’) job as the Shepherd to seek and save not ours. He is the Shepherd we need; even those under-shepherds are still sheep. Yeshua is the one who leaves the 99 on the mountain and goes searching for the one. Luke 15:5-6, which shares the same parable, goes a little further and says:

“When he has found it, he puts it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors and says, ‘Rejoice with me, for I’ve found my sheep that was lost!’” (Luke 15:5-6).

Notice, it is the Shepherd who found the sheep and carries it back on His shoulders rejoicing. It is not the under-shepherds (other sheep) that do so. Too often I have not only tried to be the Shepherd and leave my other sheep and go to try to find the lost “one,” but I have watched others try the same thing. This not only causes the issue of a sheep trying to carry a sheep, an impossible task. But it also leaves the rest of the sheep vulnerable to the wolves and lions with no leadership protection.

Too often we cause a stampede (others leaving to find a shepherd that will care for them and protect them) within our own flock because we become sidetracked trying to accomplish something that is beyond our calling and ability. It is interesting that the next verses in Matthew 18 we find after the parable of the lost sheep are the instructions for congregational discipline, which include:

“But if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to Messiah’s community. And if he refuses to listen even to Messiah’s community, let him be to you as a pagan and a tax collector” (Matt. 18:17).

Which tells us that if a sheep falls into unrepentant sin they are to be cast out of the flock until repentance comes. The order of these passages is not an accident. G-D first told us that it was Yeshua’s role and job to seek after runaway or lost sheep before he told us that there would be times when sheep would run away, and we would have to let them go until He “finds them” and “brings them back on His shoulders.” {eo}

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Someone Had Told Me Before Entering Ministry, #ManWisdom: With Eric Tokajer, Jesus Is to Christianity as Pasta Is to Italians, *and* Galatians in Context.