

# Sermons on Matthew

## Finding and Restoring the Lost

*Matthew 18:12-14*

*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)  
2/18/2007*

Finding and Restoring the Lost

*Matthew 18:12-14*

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

Getting off the island is all they can think about on the never-ending popular television series *Lost*. Their plane crashed and their pining away for home. The funny thing about the show is the flashbacks. They seem to indicate that home isn't that great.

We tend to think that God looks to the earth and finds things to help us comprehend the nature of our relationship with Him. I don't think it works that way. God has created things and experiences in this world with the specific design for us to more properly understand Him. The human father was designed for us to grasp our heavenly Father. Marriage was designed to help us appreciate the nature of our relationship with Jesus—the Groom of the church and so on.

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 our keys or wallet there is a momentary relief when we find them. Some of us have misplaced 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. Similar to our experience when a child disobediently wanders off and gets lost, there are other attending emotions which come into play; we may get frustrated, angry or discouraged. But the over-arching and controlling disposition is, or at least should be, to find them.

Luke records this lesson beginning when the Pharisees and scribes (religious leaders) criticized Jesus for His association with sinners who were coming to hear Him (Luke 15:1, 2). Matthew places it in the context of an ego or status battle between the disciples who wanted to be **“greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:1)**.

Along with this status groping and contempt for sinners comes a natural and inevitable dispassion for the lost. This attitude turns the kingdom of God on its head. Christ's church is to be a spiritual hospital where the Master Physician (Matthew 9:12) heals the eternal wounds of sin.

The “bruised reed” is not snapped by this Physician nor is the “smoking flax” quenched (Matthew 12:20). Those who, by the grace of God, come to recognize the plague of their own sin are to find in Christ’s church a harbor of refuge; they are to find Christ Himself. And the Scriptures speak in the harshest terms regarding those who present God otherwise. This lengthy passage written by Ezekiel about 600 years before the birth of Christ anticipates the coming of Christ and the corrupt shepherds of Israel with whom Christ would contend.

### Corrupt Shepherds

And the word of the Lord came to me, saying, <sup>-2-</sup> “\_Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel, prophesy and say to them, ‘\_Thus says the Lord God to the shepherds: \_\_”\_Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks? <sup>-3-</sup> \_\_You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool; you \_\_slaughter the fatlings, *but* you do not feed the flock. <sup>-4-</sup> \_\_The weak you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick, nor bound up the broken, nor brought back what was driven away, nor \_\_sought what was lost; but with \_\_force and \_\_cruelty you have ruled them. <sup>-5-</sup> \_\_So they were \_\_scattered because *there was* no shepherd; \_\_and they became food for all the beasts of the field when they were scattered. <sup>-6-</sup> My sheep \_\_wandered through all the mountains, and on every high hill; yes, My flock was scattered over the whole face of the earth, and no one was seeking or searching *for them.*” <sup>-7-</sup> ‘\_Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the Lord: <sup>-8-</sup> “\_As I live,“ says the Lord God, “\_surely because My flock became a prey, and My flock \_\_became food for every beast of the field, because *there was* no shepherd, nor did My shepherds search for My flock, \_\_but the shepherds fed themselves and did not feed My flock\_” — <sup>-9-</sup> therefore, O shepherds, hear the word of the Lord! <sup>-10-</sup> Thus says the Lord God: “\_Behold, I *am* \_\_against the shepherds, and \_\_I will require My flock at their hand; I will cause them to cease feeding the sheep, and the shepherds shall \_\_feed themselves no more; for I will \_\_deliver My flock from their mouths, that they may no longer be food for them.” <sup>-11-</sup> ‘\_For thus says the Lord God: “\_Indeed I Myself will search for My

sheep and seek them out. <sup>-12-</sup> As a \_\_shepherd seeks out his flock on the day he is among his scattered sheep, so will I seek out My sheep and deliver them from all the places where they were scattered on \_a cloudy and dark day. <sup>-13-</sup> And \_\_I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them to their own land; I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, \_\_in the valleys and in all the inhabited places of the country. <sup>-14-</sup> \_\_I will feed them in good pasture, and their fold shall be on the high mountains of Israel. \_\_There they shall lie down in a good fold and feed in rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. <sup>-15-</sup> I will feed My flock, and I will make them lie down,\_" says the Lord God. <sup>-16-</sup> \_" \_I will seek what was lost and bring back what was driven away, bind up the broken and strengthen what was sick; but I will destroy \_\_the fat and the strong, and feed them \_\_in judgment. \_" <sup>-17-</sup> ' \_And *as for* you, O My flock, thus says the Lord God: \_\_" \_Behold, I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats. <sup>-18-</sup> Is it too little for you to have eaten up the good pasture, that you must tread down with your feet the \_\_residue of your pasture—and to have drunk of the clear waters, that you must foul the residue with your feet? <sup>-19-</sup> And *as for* My flock, they eat what you have trampled with your feet, and they drink what you have fouled with your feet. \_" <sup>-20-</sup> ' \_Therefore thus says the Lord God to them: \_\_" \_Behold, I Myself will judge between the fat and the lean sheep. <sup>-21-</sup> Because you have pushed with side and shoulder, butted all the weak ones with your horns, and scattered them abroad, <sup>-22-</sup> therefore I will save My flock, and they shall no longer be a prey; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. <sup>-23-</sup> I will establish one \_\_shepherd over them, and he shall feed them— \_\_My servant David. He shall feed them and be their shepherd. <sup>-24-</sup> And \_\_I, the Lord, will be their God, and My servant David \_\_a prince among them; I, the Lord, have spoken. <sup>-25-</sup> \_" \_I will make a covenant of peace with them, and \_\_cause wild beasts to cease from the land; and they \_\_will dwell safely in the wilderness and sleep in the woods. <sup>-26-</sup> I will make them and the places all around \_\_My hill \_\_a blessing; and I will \_cause showers to come down in their season; there shall be \_\_showers of blessing. <sup>-27-</sup> Then \_\_the trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and the

earth shall yield her increase. They shall be safe in their land; and they shall know that I *am* the Lord, when I have \_\_broken the bands of their yoke and delivered them from the hand of those who \_\_enslaved them. <sup>-28-</sup> And they shall no longer be a prey for the nations, nor shall beasts of the land devour them; but \_\_they shall dwell safely, and no one shall make *them* afraid. <sup>-29-</sup> I will raise up for them a \_\_garden \_\_of renown, and they shall \_\_no longer be consumed with hunger in the land, \_\_nor bear the shame of the Gentiles anymore. <sup>-30-</sup> Thus they shall know that \_\_I, the Lord their God, *am* with them, and they, the house of Israel, *are* \_\_My people,\_" says the Lord God. ' \_" <sup>-31-</sup> " \_You are My \_\_flock, the flock of My pasture; you *are* men, and I *am* your God,\_" says the Lord God (Ezekiel 34:1-31).

This was the environment our Savior was born into. The spiritual landscape was that of corrupt spiritual leadership. 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).**

It was this which prompted the Savior, at the close of His earthly ministry to urge Peter in his ministerial pursuits.

**And he said to Him, " \_Lord, \_\_You know all things; You know that I \_\_love You.\_" Jesus said to him, " \_Feed My sheep (John 21:17b).**

And although there may be a primary application here to those in the ministry, there is a participatory nature to the new covenant which includes all believers, 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).**

Some understand this as God’s universal sentiment. God truly wants each and every person to be saved and makes every effort to ensure that, but fails in most cases. And although it is tempting to present God in this manner as Milton did in *Paradise Lost* in order to “**justify God before men**”, the idea that God actually desires something to happen that doesn’t happen (at least in terms of His decrees [plans] and providence [working out of his plans]) would make God much less than the Scriptures teach.

Notice that, similar to Peter (“**longsuffering toward us**”), there is a specificity to the objects of God’s desire; it is the near demonstrative “**these touthon little ones**”. Jesus does not say “all little ones” or “any little ones” but “these little ones”. But that leaves us with another difficulty. Just who is contained in that group? 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?

I am making this more difficult that it seems to be by design because Christians often use verses like these to argue for the incapability or inactivity of God in saving souls. This has horrendous consequences and must be avoided. Christians are to walk in the confidence and comfort of knowing their Father in heaven has plans which cannot be thwarted. The Psalmist writes:

**Whatever the Lord pleases He does, In heaven and in earth,  
In the seas and in all deep places.<sup>7</sup> \_He causes the \_vapors to  
ascend from the ends of the earth; \_He makes lightning for  
the rain; He brings the wind out of His \_\_treasuries (Psalm  
135:6).**

Christians are to know that their Father in heaven governs all things. Things don't just happen—these little ones aren't saved by luck or chance but by God. Calvin taught:

**Except then we be fully persuaded, that God by his secret providence regulates all these confusions, Satan will a hundred times a day, yea every moment, shake that confidence which ought to repose in God.<sup>1</sup>**

\_ Yet at the same time we don't know, with detailed specificity, who these people are when we walk down the street. Are they the sheep for which Jesus died (John 10:10)? Or are they among those later in John 10 of whom Jesus said **"you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep" (John 10:26)?** Are they among those **"appointed to eternal life" (Acts 13:48)?** Or are they among those **"appointed"** to disobedience (1 Peter 2:8)?

Is it even important that I do know? At some level we must say 'yes'. In Jesus' ministerial instructions in Matthew 10 He told His disciples, in short, **"if they receive you (your message concerning Me) pronounce the blessing and if not, move on."** This doesn't mean that the disciples infallibly knew who was and was not genuinely saved or who would be saved, but they had to make their best determination based upon the reaction of the listener. And sometimes it's time to move on.

So who are these people? Who are the strays?

In Luke the strays are the tax collectors and sinners who come to hear Jesus. In Matthew 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 lead astray by the corrupt shepherds.

## **Strays not Wolves**

---

<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries, Volume XV*, (Baker Book House, 1993), p. 42

The term **“goes astray”** from verse 12 *planethe* is passive and can be understood as “enticed to wander—especially from the truth.” The KJV translates **“be gone astray”**. The modern counterpart to these people are those who attend, or have attended, churches which teach corrupt doctrines leading people away from the true Christ presented in the Scriptures.

And although Jesus teaches that He has **“other sheep” (John 10:16)**, which I take to mean those elect throughout the world who had not yet heard the gospel, the context of this morning’s passage are Israelites to whom the oracles of God had been committed (Romans 3:2). And the modern application of this has more to do, not with those antagonistic to the gospel (our atheist friends who like to consume our time), but to those churching people who have been deceived to believe what Paul called **“different gospel” (Galatians 1:6)**.

What we are talking about here are evangelized people. Either children who are being corrupted by status groping leaders in the church or prodigals of a sort who have never heard the true gospel and are hungry for it. 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 person along with how we ought to approach this person. Notice 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**

It is always more joyful to have the church grow through the conversion of unbelievers than the transfer of membership; not that we don't enjoy the person as much as there is the joy of a soul that has been given life. But there is also a great joy when churching 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." 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 is attained by Jesus only; through faith that perfect obedience is imputed to sinners—to us.

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 caricature of true faith but is yet unfamiliar with the grace of God in Christ. The brand of Christianity Jesus exhorts us to present is a brand which appeals to the children and includes them; it is a brand of Christianity which catches the ears 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. What mentality should Christians foster when it comes to the lost (page 2, 3)?
2. What are some dispositions which cause us to neglect the lost (page 3)?
3. How are churches to help sinners (page 3)?
4. Discuss the corrupt shepherds from Ezekiel 34. What were they doing/not doing (pages 3-6)?
5. In what respect should we imitate Jesus (page 6)?
6. Does God want every last single person to be saved? If so, why aren't they saved (pages 6, 7)?
7. Is it important to know who the straying sheep are (page 7)?
8. Who are the "little ones" that Jesus is speaking of (pages 8, 9)?
9. Discuss the nature of 'straying' in this passage (page 8).

10. How are Christians to restore those overtaken in a trespass (pages 8, 9)?
11. How does this passage apply to today's church (pages 9, 10)?