



Matthew 18:12–14

12 “What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off?
13 And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. 14 In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should

perish.

Reflection

(Today's reflection is given by Craig Tubman)

What's really important to you? Seriously? What do you see as most important in your life? Think about this. How would you answer this question? Not what you would say to your work colleagues or to your mid-week bible study group or to your partner, but honestly, deep down in your heart of hearts what do you rate as most important in your life?

Sometimes our answer is one we would have no problem with sharing openly, but at other times our honest answer may not

be one we want to share. Perhaps it betrays a selfishness that we dare not reveal or an addiction to a substance or experience we dare not let surface.

Following on from this idea, if there was something that was of upmost importance to God, and we could know what it was, surely there would be blessing in aligning our hearts with his?

Here in Chapter 18 of Matthew we are exploring Jesus' teaching on how the church – his people – are to relate together as a community. Moving on from this passage Jesus will begin to shape the nature of this community. He'll address conflict, forgiveness and marriage. But today's passage marks the closing of his discussion regarding the what lies at the very heart

of God.

The original question out of which all of this has flowed was from the disciples in verse 1 who asked,

‘Who then is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’

I wonder how this question and Jesus’ response has sat with you over the past few days? How have Jesus’ words challenged your own view of what defines value and importance? Because in this section Jesus is subversively questioning all the markers of value and importance that you and I take as given. He’s adjusting the lens through which we view our world. The things that our human nature places so sharply in focus – the establishment of our own king-

dom, the need to establish our own brand and reputation, or simply the unquestioned vision of life being a story about ourselves – all become strangely blurry, and out of focus.

What comes into sharper clarity is God's word, friends and family who don't yet know Jesus, the poor, the church; or in a word or two – God's kingdom. At both the start and the end of this section in Matthew 18 we are led by Jesus to see that greatness in the kingdom of God is not what you might think. It's about taking the lowliest position, like that of a child in Jesus' day.

Our passage today is also very counter cultural. God's emphasis isn't on the ninety-nine who are doing the right thing, but

on the one who has strayed. His emphasis is on seeking and saving the lost. We see through Jesus' parable that God's (the shepherd's in our passage) greatest concern for these little ones is that none of them wander away. Such is his commitment to these little ones that he is like a shepherd who leaves ninety-nine sheep to find the one.

Philip Yancey once called this the poor mathematics of grace. Why would a shepherd risk the livelihood of ninety-nine sheep for one? Why wouldn't you just write that one sheep off, put it in the too hard basket, and focus on the ninety-nine in your care? Surely there is risk in going after the one? What happens if the one is found and the shepherd returns to find that the ninety-nine have been plundered?

And yet Jesus reveals that such is God's concern for his people that he will take such a risk, he will pursue and find and bring back that lost sheep. No one is written off as wastage in God's economy. He seeks and saves the lost.

Whilst this is incredibly comforting it is also challenges again our own system of values and importance. Ask the average person what is of most importance for people in today's world and you'll get a list that looks something like:

1. Find their passion
2. Pursue their passion
3. Be successful and achieve their goals
4. Find love
5. Find property

6. Find happiness

But this parable from Jesus reveals that none of these are at the top of God's list. His number one concern is not you finding your passion.

His number one concern is not for your success or even your happiness! No, God's greatest concern is that you do not wander away from him.

In this parable, I hear Jesus' words from just a chapter earlier when he warns:

‘What good is it if a person gains the whole world but forfeits their soul?’
(Matt 16:26)

The reason why Jesus has been going on and on about not causing any of these lit-

tle ones to stumble is because in God's economy faith in him is the highest value, the greatest good, the most precious connection. It's what God most values, like a shepherd leaving the ninety-nine for the one. And thus to do anything that would sever someone's faith or lead them away from him constitutes the greatest evil, the most heinous of crimes, the most tragic of events.

For me, as I read these words from Jesus I'm forced to reassess what basket I'm placing all my eggs in. It forces me to ask myself, what do I see as really important? For God himself is the one who goes after the one wandering sheep and brings them back to the fold. God rejoices when a child, a teenager, an adult comes to faith in him and gives him the position of shep-

herd and Lord over their life. There is nothing more valuable than this, for this is the stuff of God's kingdom, rejoicing in what God rejoices in.

Think & Pray

Why not take some time today, or this week to ask yourself, to ask yourself an honest question: 'What is of most importance to me?' And as you reflect upon this, consider what your actions and choices reflect as being the most important thing in your life.

Jesus turns our worlds upside down. He changes the lens through which we see and rank what is around us. And he doesn't do this simply to mess with our minds, he does it because his purpose, his mission

is to reverse the curse of sin and to bring with clarity the kingdom of God. To lift the fog of sin and give us eyes that truly see. Whilst this can be confronting, it is also incredibly liberating.

Take the time to be honest with yourself, to be honest with God in prayer and to ask God to shift your desires and passions to be in line with his. Then pray for the courage to change your life to reflect these newfound passions and desires.