

CHRIST THE SAVIOR

Michael sat listening to the choir sing, “Oh Holy Night.” He had given in and agreed to go to his coworker’s church. Sterling was a good guy. He knew Michael and his wife were separated but didn’t know the backstory. Michael’s wife had taken their two children and gone home for Christmas.

Sitting here, dressed up from head to toe, Michel projected the false image that meant so much to him—wealth and status. The truth was that the couple’s finances were messed up, and Michael had a gambling problem. After another serious offense, Michael’s wife said she couldn’t take it anymore.

Michael was a joke. A fake. And if he could just hear his wife’s words: “a miserable excuse for a husband.” Michael had told himself that he didn’t deserve his wife and family. What was wrong with him?

He wasn’t raised to be “religious.” He had been to church a few times. At first, when his coworker, Sterling, began talking to Michael about “the Lord,” he listened with a polite ear. But lately, with Michael feeling like he was in a deep hole, he had become more interested in what the man had to say. But he still felt like he was out of reach for God.

“Are you kidding me,” exclaimed Sterling. “That’s who Jesus came to seek and save—those who are lost and in need of love.”

It sounded too easy to Michael. But it also sounded too good. Maybe he would give this Lord a try.

1 Ponder when you lost something of value to you. How did you feel if you later found it?

2 How is the joy of finding something that was previously lost in any way like God’s love?

³ And he spake this parable unto them, saying, ⁴ What man of you, having an hundred sheep, if he lose one of them, doth not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness, and go after that which is lost, until he find it? ⁵ And when he hath found it, he layeth it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶ And when he cometh home, he calleth together his friends and neighbours, saying unto them, Rejoice with me; for I have found my sheep which was lost. ⁷ I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance.

³ Then Jesus told them this parable: ⁴ “Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Doesn’t he leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? ⁵ And when he finds it, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders ⁶ and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ ⁷ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”

Seeking the Lost

As Luke 15 opens, “tax collectors and sinners” are arriving to see Jesus, but Pharisees and teachers of the law express disgust: “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them” (vv. 1–2). According to His reputation, instead of spending time with the finest and most reputable folks, Jesus associates with “sinners” (v. 1). He doesn’t even debate this. Instead, Jesus tells a story.

He actually tells *three* parables about something lost-then-found: a sheep, a coin, and a son. In each of them, the point is the same. The emphasis is on the joy that comes with recovery. When we read these stories, we are supposed to understand that Jesus is defending His mission to save the lost.

He asks listeners—including disciples and detractors—to imagine being the owner of a hundred sheep, but losing one. The example is finely tuned to an audience with people who tend animals (a hundred sheep is an average-sized flock for that time and place). Sheep are notoriously needy creatures, and still they wander about with no shepherd to guide them. Alone, a sheep becomes vulnerable to predators. A senseless sheep can’t find its own way.

Because of this, the shepherd of the parable leaves the herd with ninety-nine remaining sheep. Jesus doesn't say whether the sheep are in the care of more than one shepherd, but the extravagant care for a single sheep is the point.

When the shepherd finds the one lost sheep, "he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home" (vv. 5–6). Furthermore, he invites friends and neighbors to rejoice with him, after recovering one sheep. Maybe the excitement over finding a single sheep sounds over the top, but Jesus tells the meaning of the parable. All of heaven rejoices over a sinner who repents, even more than over those who have no need (v. 7).

It helps to remember that Jesus is speaking about people with a reputation as sinners. First, the parable shows that God has not given up on them. God is actually seeking them, inviting them, welcoming them to be "found" (v. 7). Second, the parable tells us something about Jesus. Here Jesus is questioned about His actions, and He uses the well-established image of God's shepherding to describe His own behavior (compare Pss. 23; 119:176; Jer. 31:10; Ezek. 34:11–16). His audience is left to think, *If God is like a shepherd seeking the lost, who does that make Jesus?*

1 What makes the example of sheep and a shepherd compelling for Jesus' audience?

2 What makes the example of sheep and a shepherd familiar to readers of Scripture?

3 When have you demonstrated extravagant love by being willing to sacrifice for someone else?

⁶ For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. ⁸ But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. ⁹ Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him. ¹⁰ For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life.

⁶ You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

⁹ Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! ¹⁰ For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!

Saving His Enemies

Today's second reading shifts from examining Jesus' words to what Paul says about Christ's astonishing love. Paul isn't describing Jesus as a good shepherd. But just like the shepherd of the parable went out of his way to rescue a powerless sheep, Paul says that humans ("the ungodly") were "powerless" to face the predatory influence of sin without Christ (Rom. 5:6).

The manner of this salvation is more specific and more costly than in the previous parable. It is through Jesus' own death that wayward humans might be saved. The shepherd who finds and rejoices at the lost sheep is also willing to give His life, to gain safety for others. And that raises the most important question in this context, *Was it something about us that made us worthy of saving, something that compelled Jesus to act?*

To answer this, Paul provides an illustration. His Roman audience will have heard of famous figures who make the ultimate sacrifice for others: the son taking the place of his father; the soldier willing to die for his comrades; or perhaps the philosopher willingly to die

for good and righteous reasons. But none of those are a pattern that Jesus follows. No historical or legendary figure would have put life on the line for “sinners” and “enemies” (vv. 8, 10). Be reasonable!

Jesus did not dispute that He ate with sinners, and now Paul makes a similar point: humans were undeserving of Christ’s loyalty and love. Jesus did not come to people who were already loving Him back and worthy to be saved. He gave everything to the unworthy and the desperate, those counting as “enemies” to God and deserving “God’s wrath” as just punishment (vv. 8–9).

In contrast to the hopelessness we had without Jesus, those who “have now been justified by his blood” have every reason to be confident in their salvation (v. 9). The logic is, if Jesus was that loving and that caring toward enemies and those who were not His people, Jesus is going to finish the job.

The language of Paul presumes a two-stage process. Right now, for those who call upon the name of Jesus and declare Him their Lord, God makes them “reconciled”—they change from being enemies to friends. But in the future, when God’s fair judgment is revealed to all—punishing sin and rewarding righteousness—at that time “we shall be saved,” not through our own doing but “through [Jesus]’ life” (v. 10). Even now, He sits at the right hand of the Father and intercedes on our behalf (Rom. 8:34).

1 What makes all of humanity like the sheep of Luke 15?

2 Why is Jesus’ sacrificial death unlike the sacrifices that others have made in the past?

3 Does Paul describe salvation as something that happens in the present or in the future?

Loving “Fellow Enemies”

We can only love others fully as we receive and recognize Jesus' love for us. Today's readings make abundantly clear that God's love through Jesus was extended to us while we were lost and helpless—in the striking words of Romans 5:10, “God's enemies.” God loves us, but not because we deserve His love. Period. This should not only give us a deeper understanding of God's love for us, but also point the way forward for how we should live and love others in Christ.

In many ways, we are all still helpless sheep. Christians don't become immune to temptation or sin. But an important change comes when we know our Shepherd and listen to His voice (John 10:14). We can call upon Him when we need rescue (which is often). And just as Jesus laid down His life for His sheep, He seeks those “not of this sheep pen” (v. 15–16). We can be His partners in that mission.

Or, we can be like the Pharisees of Luke 15, who were jealous of Christ's time and attention. We have to guard against drawing the circle of God's rescue as too small and giving up on those we deem unworthy, like political opponents and those who have different experiences from our own. It's easy to demonstrate love and to share Christ when we hold things in common. It's harder to face those who offend us and to see them as the very people that Jesus might ask us to befriend.

He met each of us in our weaknesses and faults, when we were His enemies. If He can change us, He can change anyone. So let's ask God to help our fellow enemies who cross our path. Jesus sees and loves them.

1 When has Jesus had to pursue you and bring you back?

2 How does remembering your failures help you reach out to others?

3 What kinds of fellow enemies do you find it hardest to love?

Join the Shepherd on His Mission

Jesus pursued us long before we realized how far we had wandered from Him. The more we know and appreciate this, the more we'll want to partner with God's kingdom work.

Think of one person or group that you find hard to love while you pray:

God, since you expect me to pray for my enemies, this week I will do just that. Christ, have mercy on the people I consider enemies.

Key Text

For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life. —Romans 5:10 KJV

For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! —Romans 5:10 NIV

Quiet Hour® and Cross Daily Bible Readings

Week of December 22 through 27

- Mon.** Zechariah 4:1–7—The Spirit Accomplishes God's Will.
- Tue.** 1 Corinthians 12:1–13—The Spirit Bestows Gifts.
- Wed.** Isaiah 11:1–9—The Spirit Gives Wisdom and Understanding.
- Thu.** Matthew 1:18–25—The Spirit Works in Jesus's Birth.
- Fri.** Acts 7:51–60—The Spirit Reveals God's Glory.
- Sat.** Psalm 104:24, 29–35—The Spirit Creates and Renews.

Next Week: Romans 8:12–17, 26–27

We will speak about the Spirit, who confirms when we are children of God. Be listening for the tone that children use when they call their parents.