The Stray Sheep in the Mountains

Scripture Readings: Isaiah 53:1-7; Ezekiel 34:1-16; Matthew 18:1-14; John 10:1-16

Text: Matthew 18:10–14

Rev. Nollie Malabuyo • September 5, 2010

Introduction

Who are the greatest among the Protestant Reformers? Among Reformed believers, John Calvin's name would always be mentioned—together with Martin Luther, John Knox and Ullrich Zwingli—in the top two or three.

While many evangelicals hear about Calvin in the so-called “Five Points of Calvinism,” and mistakenly think that he was its author, he would not have wanted his name mentioned as the author of these doctrines. On the contrary, he would have said that Christ is the author of Scriptural doctrines. In fact, he spoke and wrote very little about himself in his voluminous writings, always pointing his readers to the Triune God. Before he died, he requested to be buried in an unmarked grave, not wishing that people would give attention to him after he was gone, but only to his Lord and Savior.

Such was the humility of this man of God, in contrast to Jesus' disciples who argued among themselves, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” In asking this question, the disciples obviously thought that greatness in the kingdom of heaven is measured by human standards: accomplishments, power, wealth, influence and popularity.

Jesus responds to his disciples' question by taking a child in his arms and teaching them a lesson about humility: a child's humility consists of childlike trust in the parents for help in resources, direction and wisdom. The squabbling disciples must have been very disappointed to hear him say, “Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 18:4). As well, a servant attitude, not power and influence, is the essence of belonging to his kingdom, “The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (Matt 23:11-12).

In Chapter 18 of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus teaches his disciples the nature of life in his kingdom, explaining its characteristics and its relationships, both with one another and with the world. He takes a child and calls him a “little one” (Matt 18:5), and encourages his listeners to receive them and give them “a cup of cold water” (Matt 10:40-42). Tragically, many today misunderstand these words as Jesus' endorsement of Christian ministries to street children and the poor. On the contrary, his emphasis here is for his disciples to have a childlike trust and humility, and calls his disciples “little ones who believe in me.”

In verses 6-9, Jesus warns those who would cause his “little ones” to sin: it is better for them to drown in the sea, because they would surely be judged and tormented in hell. He then uses hyperboles to make a point that his disciples must exercise rigorous self-control, and radically cut sin off from their lives, because sin would send them to hell's eternal fire.

But in verses 10-14, Jesus gives his disciples a reason for hope, even if they are relentlessly tempted to sin and go astray. He is the Good Shepherd who counts the number of his sheep and searches for those who go astray in the mountains. As one who cares for his flock, Jesus ventures out into the wilderness to find his stray “little ones.” His flock is secure in the knowledge that it is not the Father's will that even one of them—even those who go astray—will be completely lost and perish in the way.
We consider today “The Stray Sheep in the Mountains”: first, Why Sheep Go Astray; second, What the Shepherd Does; and third, Why Stray Sheep are Found.

I. Why Sheep Go Astray

In Luke's version of this parable (Luke 15:1-7), Jesus talks about sheep that are "lost"—a word used to refer to unsaved sinners who are bound to perish and be destroyed in hell (Matt 10:6; Luke 19:10; John 17:12). In our text, the sheep are not called "lost," but they go "astray."

The shepherd has a flock of 100 sheep in his sheepfold. He cares for them, feeds them, guides them into safe pathways, and protects them from wild beasts who would devour them. But even under the shepherd's care, one of the 100 go astray. It wanders off into the mountain wilderness and does not know his way back to the sheepfold. It is exposed to the harsh elements, without food and water, and in danger of being prey for wild beasts. How does this one sheep go astray?

A. Seduced by Deceivers

The word that Jesus uses for this one "stray" sheep, means one who is "led away from the truth and into error," and one who is "deceived." Who are these deceivers?

Jesus makes the connection between deceivers and false prophets. He warns us, “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves" (Matt 7:15). Deceivers of his sheep are hungry wolves pretending to be one of the sheep. They are false prophets and teachers who promise good things to the sheep—food, shelter, protection—but they are greedy, voracious predators who will instead devour the sheep they lead away from the true sheepfold.

As Jesus sent out his disciples, he warned them, "I am sending you out as sheep and lambs in the midst of wolves" (Matt 10:16; Luke 10:3). He says that these false teachers are wolves who "will snatch them and scatter them" (John 10:12). Paul warns the Colossians not to let themselves be snatched away and taken captive by these false teachers with their "philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ" (Col 2:8).

This is why Paul also warned the elders shepherding the church in Ephesus that after he was gone from their midst, "fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock" (Acts 20:29). These deceivers, Paul said, will come from within the church, "from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:30). They are skilled in the art of scheming and are successful in persuading the sheep to disobey the leading of the shepherd, and "by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive" (Rom 16:18). Because of these false teachers, "some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared" (1 Tim 4:1-2).

Today, many deceivers come as sheep in wolves' clothing. They pretend to be one of the sheep, as pastors and teachers skilled in using words from Scriptures. They perform their spectacular signs and wonders in churches, stadiums and convention centers all over the world in order to deceive everyone, even the elect if it is possible. By smooth talk and flattery, many popular televangelists such as Mike Velarde and Eddie Villanueva lead millions of the naive and desperate astray by promises of material wealth, good health, and "your best life now" to their followers. Multitudes are led into destructive demonic heresies, such as the Oneness Pentecostalism of Apollo Quiboloy.
Some evangelicals even teach that all religions lead to the same God and the same heaven. Many others persuade the unsuspecting but compassionate that poverty is the cause of all evil, and that economic empowerment is the way to salvation. Still others twist the essence of the Bible as merely an instruction manual for righteous living. Multitudes as well have been deluded by these false teachers that the goal of public worship of God is primarily to attract and entertain the "unchurched" by catering to their "felt needs"; thus, all kinds of abominable gimmicks are created in their minds, which are "idol factories." In short, these avaricious wolves have seduced unsuspecting sheep by their watered-down gospels—gospels that Paul calls "accursed" (Gal 1:8, 9). And Peter describes these false teachers as "accursed children," with "eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin... [enticing] unsteady souls... hearts trained in greed" (2 Pet 2:14).

But false prophets and teachers are not the only deceivers in the world. Your family and friends may also deceive you with offers of the pleasures of this world. "Don't believe what the Bible says; they're only myths and legends." "Christianity is a killjoy; it's no fun!" "Eat, drink and be merry, for there is no such thing as life after death." "It's not important whether there's a true church there; what's important is all the money that awaits us in the Middle East."

Many people around us not only practice all kinds of godlessness and unrighteousness; they are proud to promote them. Paul warns us about them: "Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them" (Rom 1:32). Television, movie and sports celebrities strut their wares in public—their sexual immorality, greed, disobedience to parents, homosexuality, and indecent talk. And even those in the churches imitate such ungodliness among these unrepentant sinners, in songs, dances, and other entertaining gimmicks in their abominable worship.

But Jesus warns them, "whoever causes one of these little ones... to sin"—to be a stumbling block and to offend them—is better to be drowned in the sea. "Woe to the one by whom the temptation comes!" (verse 7). The consequences for false shepherds are eternal: fire and damnation in hell. Jesus echoes Ezekiel's warning to the false shepherds of Israel: they did not feed the sheep, but fed themselves; they did not care for the sick and the weak; they did not search for those that are astray; they ruled them with violence and cruelty. So the sheep were scattered in the mountains without a shepherd (Ezek 34:1-6). So God declared his judgment against them in Ezekiel 34:10, "I am against the shepherds, and I will require my sheep at their hand" and in Jeremiah 23:1: "Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture!"

**B. Tempted by Their Own Sinful Selves**

Jesus says that the world will always have temptations for the sheep to go astray and sin, "Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come" (Matt 18:7). But by their own will, through the deceptions of wolves in sheep's clothing, the sheep go astray from the shepherd. Sheep are by nature weak and not very smart. They merely follow other sheep and the shepherd. They will follow other sheep even all the way to their death on a cliff. This is why all mankind are described as sheep that went astray who have turned away from God and instead turned to their own sinful ways (Psa 119:176; Isa 53:6; 1 Pet 2:25). Paul confirms man's hopeless condition, "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one" (Rom 3:10-12).

No one can say then that he is able to seek God and understand God by his own "free will." Our wills are like those of stray sheep: we have willfully turned away from God. All of us are worthless, and no one does good by his own will. And no one can say that he is part of the
sheepfold if he continues to go astray. Jesus says that the sheep know his voice and follow him (John 10:4). If you do not follow him, then you do not know his voice, and thus, you are not one of his sheep. Woe to you, Jesus says, because you will be lost forever and perish in the mountains!

If his stray sheep is so helpless and hopeless on its own, what does the shepherd then do to help?

II. **What the Shepherd Does**

Daily, before it gets dark, the shepherd counts his sheep in the sheepfold to make sure that all 100 are safely in. But when he finds that one is missing, he leaves the 99 sheep and scours the mountains for the one who has gone astray. The 99 are secured and protected in their sheepfold.

*A. He Cares for the Sheep*

It is not that the sheep looks for the shepherd; the shepherd seeks for it. The theme of Luke Chapter 15 is God who seeks out lost sinners: lost coin, lost sheep, lost son. The woman searches for the lost coin and the shepherd looks for the lost sheep. Both are found by their owners. Finally, the father looks for his lost son, and he finds him.

When the shepherd finds the stray sheep, what does he do? He brings it back to the fold and cares for it. Ezekiel 34:3-5 lists the responsibilities of the shepherd to his sheep. He gives food and water to the hungry and thirsty. If it is hurt, weak or sick, he binds its wounds and nourishes it to health. If it is afraid, he assures it of protection in the sheepfold. He cares for it tenderly, nudging it with his staff carefully, not cruelly or violently hitting it to make it obey. He protects them from all wild beasts. And when one strays, he seeks for it and brings it back after he finds it.

Our song, Psalm 23, speaks about how the the Lord as shepherd cares for his sheep. The sheep is sufficiently provided with care for body—green pastures and still waters. As well, the shepherd cares for the sheep's soul: leading them to paths of righteousness, guiding them through dark valleys, comforting them in times of suffering, providing them with an overflowing supply of good things, and preparing for them an eternal dwelling place in heaven, in communion with the Father.

This is what Jesus the Good Shepherd does for his sheep in John 10:1-16. He protects them from robbers and wild beasts who would steal them and kill them. He knows each one by name and safely leads them one by one in and out of the gate of the sheepfold. Because of this, the sheep know his voice, listen to him, and follow his commands. They do not listen to false shepherds who are greedy hirelings looking out only after their own selfish motives, because they know the voice and the commands of their Good Shepherd.

This is why Jesus commanded Simon Peter and all his undershepherds, "*Feed my sheep*" (John 21:15-17), not once, not twice, but three times. He wants his disciples to know that it is their duty as undershepherds to fully and completely nourish his sheep so that they lack nothing. And the apostles command Jesus' shepherds today—pastors and elders—"*shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight.*" They are to be "*examples to the flock," unlike the unfaithful shepherds of Ezekiel 34, who shepherded only "*under compulsion... for shameful gain... domineering over those in [their] charge*" (1 Pet 5:2-3).

*B. He Laid Down His Life for the Sheep*

Not only does the Good Shepherd care for his sheep: he actually laid down his life for them, "*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep*"(John 10:11).

To rescue his lost sheep, Jesus became one of them, a meek and obedient Lamb of God who gave himself as a sacrifice on the cross: "*He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened*
not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearsers is silent, so he opened not his mouth” (Isa 53:7).

And although Jesus preached first to the Jews, his sheep is not only the lost sheep of Israel (Matt 15:24), but also other sheep: "And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd" (John 10:16). Therefore, Jesus seeks his sheep all over the nations: "I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land" Ezekiel 34:12-13).

And when he has gathered all his sheep from the nations, there will be one flock of Jews and Gentiles, without a dividing wall of hostility, and he will be their one Shepherd, giving both of them access in one Spirit to his Father (Eph 2:13-18).

What else does the Good Shepherd do after he finds the stray sheep and cares for it?

III. Why Stray Sheep are Found

When the shepherd finds the stray sheep, he rejoices over it more than over the 99 who never went astray. Luke 15:6-7 says, “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.' 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.”

There’s rejoicing in heaven every time one stray or lost sheep is found! As Reformed believers, we are big on predestination, and we sometimes become proud that we are one of God’s chosen people. But we must remember that it is only by God’s grace and mercy that we are part of the elect sheep of Christ. Our election is not our own doing, so we are to humble ourselves in repentance of our pride before God.

Let us also remember, with grief and sorrow, those who are not part of the sheepfold of Jesus who are perishing in their ways and are bound to eternal fire. God is not pleased—in fact, he is sorrowful—when a person perishes in hell, when he asks, “Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord GOD, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?” (Ezek 18:23) The Apostle Peter knows this very well, “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Pet 3:9). God is grieved whenever someone perishes because he has rejected the free and universal offer of the gospel.

But God rejoices when one of his sheep is finally found and led to his sheepfold. One day, Christ will count his “little ones” in the sheepfold and find that the number is complete. Then he would declare, “All that the Father has given me has come to me” (John 6:37). On that day, heaven’s rejoicing will be complete because the sheepfold is complete.

On the cross, Christ completed his work of laying down his life for his sheep, so he declared, “It is finished.” On the last day, he would finish his work of gathering his flock from mountains and valleys and from cities and fields in all the nations of the world. Christ has not cast out anyone who belongs to his sheepfold. When that day finally comes, he would have gathered all his sheep from all the nations. The time has come for him to take them from their earthly sheepfold to their
heavenly home. On that blessed day, "he would send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other" (Matt 24:31).

His Father in heaven has promised his Son that in sending him to the world, it is his Father's will “that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day... that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life” (John 6:39-40). This is why he can confidently tell us in verse 14 of our text, “So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.” Rather, those who are in his sheepfold know him, believe in him, and have eternal life.

**Conclusion**

Beloved in Christ, you all used to be sheep who have gone astray by those who deceived you by their false teachings or by offers of worldly pleasures. You gave in to your sinful nature to the temptations of sin. But Christ became as one of you, as a sacrificial Lamb on the cross. He has found you in your sin in the mountain wilderness, and took you to his sheepfold under his gracious and merciful care.

Why did Christ find you? Because you are one of those sheep that the Father has given him. Be assured that because you are one of his sheep, he found you. You believed in him, and in believing, he has given you eternal life. And when the number of sheep in his sheepfold is complete, he will return on the last day to take you to your heavenly sheepfold, where the Lamb will be your shepherd, guiding you to springs of living water, wiping away every tear from your eyes (Rev 7:17).

To you who do not believe in Christ, on that last day, the Good Shepherd will sit on his throne as the Judge of the Universe to judge all the nations. He will separate all the people of the world into two folds: one for the sheep, and the other one for the goats. If you had strayed away from the sheepfold and had become completely lost in your unbelief, you will not be counted as one of his sheep who will enter into the blessedness of the kingdom of heaven. Rather, you will be one of the accursed goats whom Christ the Judge will send into eternal punishment of fire. But you have one hope: Jesus the Good Shepherd seeks for you to repent of your sins and turn to the paths of righteousness where his sheep are walking on their way to their heavenly home.

And to you who belong to the sheepfold but stray from the paths of righteousness because of worldly temptations, Jesus also commands you to repent of your sins and turn back to the right paths. If you do not repent and turn back, be forewarned: it might be that you really do not know the voice of the Good Shepherd calling your name. You might be like Judas the son of destruction, who strayed from the right paths, did not repent, and was finally lost because of unbelief. Because if you truly hear and know your Shepherd's voice, like Peter—who only strayed away for a time—you will follow him and his commands.

But if you repent and turn back, be assured that he will never cast you out. No ravenous wolf will be able to snatch you away from your Father's hand because it is not the will of the Father that you perish in the wilderness. So make sure that you are walking the paths of righteousness, following your Good Shepherd with fear and trembling, because “he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ,” our great Shepherd of the sheep. Amen.