

The purpose of this leader's guide is to be a tool for ABF and Life Group leaders to follow the sermon series with their group. Our hope is that this guide will give you a head start for your study and will allow your group to respond to what they've heard and apply it for life.*

Why Parables?. In Definition the word parable comes the Greek word 'parabole,' which means "a placing beside" and therefore is a comparison or an illustration. The gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke contain about 30 of these stories while John's gospel contains no parables but does use figures of speech. A parable is a story taken from real life (or real life situation) from which a moral or spiritual truth is drawn. They are not fables (talking animals/walking trees). They are not allegories where every detail has hidden meaning. They are basically an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.

When Jesus began to teach in parables, it represented a new direction in His ministry. We are told that from when they were introduced, from this point forward, Jesus typically taught the multitudes in this form. He continued to teach his disciples in a plain manner, but the crowds primarily got parables (Matthew 13:11, Mark 4:11). A common misunderstanding is that parables were given so that all people could easily understand, but upon further study this may not be the case. Although parables were more relatable because they were stories about real life situations, they often had hidden meanings needing further explanation. These hidden meanings challenged the sincerely interested to further inquiry, and taught truths that Jesus concealed from various groups/people (Matthew 11:25, Luke 8:10). The parables teach us about the Sovereignty of God (11-12), the responsibility of man (14-15), and the grace of the gospel (16-17).

Parable of the Straying Sheep (or Lost Sheep)

Context of Matthew 18:12-14. In this passage, Jesus is telling this parable to His disciples. This is similar to the Parable of the Lost Sheep told in Luke 15. There is a noticeable difference however in Jesus' audience and the words used in each parable. The Parable in Matthew 18 is referred to as the Parable of the Lost Sheep. Based on some commentators of this passage, a more fitting title for this parable might be the Parable of the Straying Sheep. This is not only due to the support of commentators but more importantly the context and language used in this passage. For those following Christ however, it is not our role to determine whether or not a person is a true follower as only God can know the heart. It is our role to care and pursue after those who are not following Christ, that need to repent and be reconciled to God for His glory.

Read Matthew 18:12-14 - Explanation and Lesson

The Shepherd's Care

1) **A Good Shepherd seeks the straying one (v.12):** The man leaves the 99 on the side of a mountain and seeks after the one that has gone astray. There is some risk involved in leaving the 99, yet he will go and search for the one in need. The present tense used, points to the continuous effort of seeking. He abandons his normal routine and concentrates all of his energy on the lost one. Barclay's commentary points out that Palestinian shepherds were experts at tracking down their sheep. They would brave the cliffs and the precipice to bring it back. This is what the shepherd will do.

2) A Good Shepherd rejoices when the straying one is found (v.13): Because he loves and cares for all his sheep, the recovery of just one out of a hundred is a case of joy. I believe there are two lessons here:

- a) **God is the Great Shepherd of His sheep:** Jesus gives us a glimpse of God's love and forgiveness. He makes the application Himself in v. 14. Because of Jesus' explanation in verse 14, we learn that the point of this parable is primarily about God. The implicit argument is that if ordinary people pursue mere sheep when they are lost, how much more will God respond with one of His children that goes astray. We learn this same truth in John 10 (vv. 14, 27-30) and again in Matthew 12 (11,12). Why does He pursue one who goes astray? Because it is not His will to lose, cut off, condemn those that are of "His fold." It is not the will of God 'that one of these little ones should perish.' The Great Shepherd looks after and saves His sheep. He personally pursues the one, not just the flock as a whole.
- b) **The church is a picture of the shepherd:** It is our role as disciples of Jesus (the church) to share in God's concern for each "little one," and not despise any, no matter how it looks. It is all too easy to turn from straying members and want nothing to do with them. They bring dishonor to Christ through their blatant sin. They bring disgrace to the church. They may damage and even destroy their families. They abandon friends and fellow believers and deprive them of fellowship, support, and encouragement just to name a few. If we are not careful anger, disgust, and indifference can become our response to those who stray. Although this might be an understandable human response, this is not the response God wants us to have. Our attitude should be to hate the sin but love the sinner back into the 'fold.' Since God pursues the wayward, we must pursue.

Grace and Truth: Although we are to forgive and pursue as God does, Jesus wants us to completely respond to the wayward by grace and truth. We see this in the verses following the parable (15-17) which speak of the responsibility for the church to discipline. The parable and these verses do not contradict. The heart behind church discipline is not to correct or to shame, but to reconcile and bring repentance to the believer. Consequences will result from the sin, but healing, restoration, repentance, and God's glory is the ultimate goal.

Lesson of this parable: Although the audience is different in Luke's gospel, the lesson for both is the same: God pursues the lost. Whether you are an unbeliever who needs to repent or a backslidden believer, you must ask: What does God think of me? Would He ever pay attention to me? Would He hear if I called? Indeed, He would. Before you ever began to even glance in God's direction, He was already in pursuit of you. He began to open your mind and heart to biblical truth. He began to send people into your life and work through circumstances to point you to Him. God has been on your trail for some time. Jesus came into the world to save sinners, says Paul, even the foremost of all (1 Tim. 1:15). He pursues, seeks after, and searches for the worst. Fornicators, homosexuals, drunkards, idolaters, thieves, revilers, adulterers, covetous, swindlers, effeminate is a list of those that God has been saving and redeeming for 2000 years. He seeks them and wins them and if they go astray, He pursues them again. Even more, God rejoices when the lost are found. If this is our God and He has pursued us, how much more should His followers pursue the lost and those gone astray. In our personal lives, and in our life together as the church, we must aggressively seek to reconcile straying members and pursue the lost.

General Reflection:

- 1) What does this passage teach us about God?
- 2) What does this passage teach us about mankind?
- 3) What is a command to obey in this passage? What has God revealed in your life that needs changing? What truth can be applied to your life about the gospel?

Personal Reflection/Application

- 4) Jesus begins this parable with, 'What do you think?,' speaking of the little ones facing temptation (7-11). What is the implication of this question? Compare with Matthew 12:11,12.
- 5) What is God's outlook on the wayward believer? What does this mean for the church?
- 6) What is our role as the church for a wayward believer from the time they go astray to bringing them back into 'the fold,?' Think through these things: Pursue them, seek repentance/ restoration, discipline (private correction, smaller group clarification, church admonition, or church excommunication).
- 7) How do we identify and even confront those who are 'wayward?' Consider the following questions:
 - a) Are you causing, leading, or enabling a brother or sister to sin?
 - b) Are you guarding, protecting, and nurturing your own personal holiness?
 - c) Do you seek to protect God's glory first or does your personal desires and agenda come first?
 - d) Are you clearly expressing the love of the Father to the church around you?
 - e) Is there anyone you need to humbly confront concerning sin for their good and for the Father's glory?
 - f) Are you harboring any bitterness or unforgiveness toward someone else?
- 8) How does this parable give us insight to our motive for church discipline?
- 9) How does this parable and much of this chapter provide powerful support for the need of local church membership (a local body of believers)?

Prayer

God, may your love and your pursuit of me, motivate and compel me to pursue and love those who are lost or who have gone astray. Give me a heart of reconciliation and love, not judgment when pursuing and interacting with those who are walking away from you. Help me to never forget that I was once lost and wayward, yet you pursued and saved me.

*Resources and quotes used for this study guide: "The parables of Jesus" by T. Johnson