

We're going to read a parable and teaching from Jesus that show God's passionate joy is pursuing people on the outside. And when we act in the same way that God does, we bring a sense of heaven to earth.

"See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven. (Matthew 18:10)

Outsiders

Who is Jesus talking about with "little ones"? Perhaps Jesus is referring specifically to children (as in the previous passage), but perhaps Jesus is using the image of a child to make a wider point. The original Greek for "little ones" refers to someone who is unimportant or insignificant. Someone who is an outsider. Don't despise these outsiders. To "despise" means to determine that someone is not worth your concern. Jesus says it's the "little ones"—the insignificant, the outsiders—who have God's attention. The people often looked down upon are the ones who are thought highly of by God.

"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? 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. (verses 12–13)

God's Passion for the Lost

Then Jesus tells a parable. Imagine a shepherd has 100 sheep, but one of those sheep wanders away. The sheep becomes lost, separated from the shepherd, an outsider. What will the shepherd do? The shepherd responds in two bizarre ways. First, the shepherd leaves the 99 sheep who didn't wander away. This seems irresponsible—if you leave 99 sheep, you will have 99 more lost sheep. The second bizarre action of the shepherd is that he rejoices more over the one that was lost and found than the 99 sheep who never strayed. This seems unfair—the 99 didn't do anything "wrong." The shepherd passionately and joyfully pursues the lost sheep. What is Jesus saying?

In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish. (verse 14)

The phrase, "in the same way," tell us that parable is meant to convey something about what God is like. The purpose of this parable is to show how God treats the "little ones," people on the outside, people who are lost. How does God treat them? He

passionately and joyfully pursues the outsider. God's passionate joy is to go toward people who are lost. You get the sense that if all 100 sheep were lost, the shepherd wouldn't rest until He found every single one. And there is joy in this act. The emotion of the parable is not anger, frustration, or disappointment, but rather joy. God's passionate joy is for people who have lost their way.

This has powerful implications for people like you and me. If you have ever felt like an outsider, you are not far from God. If you have ever felt lost, distant from God, searching for purpose and meaning, you are not far from God. God goes after people like you.

Then comes a teaching from Jesus that seems like it doesn't fit, but profoundly connects to the way God treats people.

"If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector. (verses 15–17)

Jesus teaches His disciples what to do when someone in their community of faith acts in sin. But we need to define a few things. First, "sin" has various connotations in the Biblical narrative, but think of sin generally as life outside of the design of God. To sin is to be an outsider. Second, to "win over" doesn't mean that you have wooed them with a fancy argument, or shamed them into bending to your way. Rather to "win them over" in the original Greek means "to cause loss not to happen." So, Jesus is teaching how to act towards someone who has lost sight of the way of God with the goal that maybe you can bring an end to the lost-ness.

Here is Jesus' approach: go to them directly, and maybe they will be brought back. If not, bring two more people. Why? In Jewish law, two witnesses were required for objectivity and justice (Deut. 19:15). Maybe a few people saying the same thing will bring the person back. If not, bring the church—a community of people with common faith that cares for them. Not to shame, nor to be vindicated. The goal is that person on the outside will be brought back in.

And then Jesus says something fascinating that connects us back to the reckless, joyful shepherd, and could transform how we treat one another today.

Pagans and Tax Collectors

In Jesus' day, "pagans and tax collectors" were people who rejected God. They were outsiders. Tax collectors, particularly, were an interesting group. They were Jewish people who collected excessive taxes for the (pagan empire) of Rome. They rejected God by exploiting their fellow Jewish brothers and sisters.

How did people treat pagans and tax collectors? The normal way was to not associate with them. They were barred from the synagogue (the place of worship and community). They were people who sinned and lost sight of God's design. So, for a lot of people, this how they interpret Jesus' teaching—give someone three chances, but after that, reject and excluded them. But here's the interesting thing: that's not how Jesus treated pagans and tax collectors. Jesus didn't exclude them but moved toward them.

For example, in Luke 19, Jesus arrives in Jericho and encounters one of the most successful tax collectors around, Zacchaeus. In other words, Zacchaeus is one of the most unjust and well-known sinners (living outside of the design of God) in his town. What does Jesus do? Jesus goes toward Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus changes his ways when faced with the grace of Jesus. The people watching this scene are frustrated; that's not how we treat tax collectors. But Jesus says that "salvation" has arrived today. More than that, Jesus says that the reason He came to earth was to pursue people like Zacchaeus (Luke 19:9–10). Like a shepherd whose goes after the one sheep that wandered away, Jesus' passion is to bring back those who have lost their way.

So, Jesus teaches when someone you're in a relationship with acts contrary to the way of God, go to them with the goal to stop them from becoming lost. Bring two more people, so truth reigns and perhaps they will be brought back. Then bring a community of people who love them and maybe they will be brought back. And if they still don't listen? Treat them like a pagan and tax collector. How do you treat pagans and tax collectors? Treat them like Jesus does—and start the process again. It doesn't mean that you ignore sin, but you pursue them again. Because that is how God treats people on the outside. God doesn't give three strikes, and you're out. God is like a shepherd who passionately pursues the outsider because His joy is to see them restored.

For many of us, this raises a host of questions. Maybe you've been around relationships that are harmful. Are we supposed to forget all of that and just blindly accept? Perhaps you're thinking of situations right now where you've created healthy boundaries. Are we saying those are wrong? No, that's not the case. I think Jesus is talking more about us than them. Sometimes we keep people as outsiders. Sometimes we draw dividing lines. Sometimes we keep people as pagans and tax collectors instead of treating them like pagans and tax collectors. Sometimes people are outsiders because we've made them outsiders. But

that's not the way that God treats people on the outside. What if how we treat the people on the outside had eternal significance?

We see this in the next set of verses.

"Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

"Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them."
(verses 18–20)

Bind and Release

You can keep someone as an outsider, but it has significant implications. And you can go after someone to invite them back in, and it has significant implications. You have the power to bring heaven and earth together by how you treat people. For example, think of the last time someone offended you. You had a choice at that moment to forgive them or not. In other words, you had a choice to keep them bound or loosen them from the weight of their sin. You had the power to make them an outsider or to bring them back.

Two or Three

There is more in these phrase than we have time to unpack. But two observations. First, to "agree" is the Greek word, "*sumphoneo*," from which we get the word, "symphony." It means to fit together, to match in sound. Whatever people are gathered in common purpose with God, so didn't have it comes to earth. Second, whenever people gather together to pursue the way of Jesus something of heaven comes to earth. We live in a world where all of us know what it's like to be outside. We know what it's like to keep people on the outside. Something of heaven comes to earth when we act on ways that those dividing lines start to fade.

Two Questions

What do we do with this teaching? A question for you and a question for us as a church. First, for you: who are you keeping as an outsider? I don't mean that you pretend sin doesn't exist. Part of the heartache of our upside-down world is that we have immense power to hurt one another. We need to be wise, including healthy boundaries. But we can also harden our heart to people. We can easily despise people and consider them to be not worthy of our concern. If they abandoned their lost-ness and came back, would you rejoice?

Second, a question for us as a church: what is our posture towards people who don't believe like us? There is likely someone sitting near you that doesn't believe what you believe. People are living near you, working at the desk across from you, that

doesn't believe what you believe. Is our passion and joy to find ways to introduce them to the Shepherd?

The Shepherd

The way to return is through the Shepherd. The emphasis of the parable is the passionate pursuit by the Shepherd, for the action of the Shepherd is the way back. The emphasis of the teaching on sin in the community of faith is you repeatedly going towards the person on the outside, for acting like the Shepherd is their way back to the community. One modern-day author wrote that, in light of the parable of the lost sheep, "it is precisely our sins, and not our goodnesses, that most commend us to the grace of God" (Capon).

As we practice communion, we realize that the sacrifice of Jesus wasn't because we had it all together, that somehow we were better than somebody else. Jesus died and rose again for people who didn't have it all together. For people who are wandering off. For people who had sinned. The incredible thing about practicing communion is the sudden realization that the outsider that Jesus died to restore was you. It's easy to imagine in your mind that the wandering sheep or the person who sins is someone other than you. But the reality is that you were that outsider. How did Jesus act toward you? He passionately and joyfully pursued you.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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