

INTRODUCTION

We love our high school sports in Texas. Texas has some strange mascots and team names. Here are actual team names from Texas high schools: There are the Little River Bumblebees; the Killeen Kangaroos; the Taylor Fighting Ducks, the Springtown Fighting Porcupines; the San Saba Armadillos; the New Braunfels Unicorns; the Atlanta Rabbits; the Hamlin Pied Pipers; the Grandview Zebras; but my two favorite are the Hutto Hippos; and in Dallas the Hockaday School's team is the Daisies.

Texas doesn't have the corner on strange team names. In Kent, Connecticut, the high school team is called the Screaming Pterodactyls. How would like to be a cheerleader there? Give me a P or is a T?

I have done some research and I haven't found one team named the Lambs. The most popular team names are the Tigers, Lions, Eagles, and Bears. But have you ever known a school anywhere called the Fighting Lambs or the Mighty Sheep? But of all the animals in His Creation, God has chosen the Lamb to be the mascot of the human race. We are more often compared with sheep than with any other animal. Because we're like sheep, we need a Shepherd who will rescue us when we wander. That's what Jesus talks about in the parable of the rejoicing Shepherd in Matthew 18:10-14:

“See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven. 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 look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.”

A real-life shepherd once wrote that sheep display three unique characteristics: they are dumb; they are directionless; and they are defenseless. You won't see sheep used in a circus act, because they are too dumb to be trained to perform tricks. Sheep wander off and can't find their way back to the flock. Homing pigeons, and even dogs and cats can find their way home—but have you ever heard of a homing lamb? Most animals have teeth, claws, or a shell for defense; a poor sheep doesn't have any natural means of defense. Without Christ we are dumb, directionless and defenseless. The Bible says “We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way.” (Isaiah 53:6) The main thing sheep need is a shepherd, and fortunately Jesus offers to be our good shepherd. Let's learn four lessons from this parable:

1. BECAUSE GOD CARES FOR EVERYONE, WE SHOULDN'T LOOK DOWN ON ANYONE

“See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.” The focus of Matthew 18 is on children of God—both literal children and spiritual children. This is the sixth time Jesus has referred to the “little ones who believe.” In the time of Jesus, children were considered inferior or unimportant, but Jesus loved the little children and welcomed them into His arms. The disciples were

concerned with status—they had been arguing about who was the greatest. In light of this discussion, Jesus used a little child as an example of greatness in the eyes of God.

Jesus mentioned “their angels in heaven.” This verse has been used to support the idea that every child has a guardian angel, an angel who stays with them from the moment that they’re born until they die. That’s a comforting thought, but the term “guardian angel” never appears in the Bible. Notice that Jesus says these angels aren’t *with* the children, they are in heaven looking into the face of the Father. Remember Jacob’s dream in Genesis 28? He saw a ladder with angels shuttling back and forth between heaven and earth. Angels aren’t omnipresent. If an angel is in heaven, he can’t be here on earth. While I don’t believe a person has one guardian angel, we have thousands of angels who have the ability to guard us when our Heavenly Father directs them. In a real sense, all the angels are “our angels.” Hebrews 1:14 tells us that “angels are ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation.” I address this concept more fully in my book on angels, (*Angels Really Do Exist*, 2005).

The fact that God has provided angels to help us is just another indication of how much He cares for us. Because children are important to God, they are important to us. I became a Christian when I was 9 years old. I imagine over half the people who attend our church came to know Christ when they are children.

2. JESUS IS THE GREAT SHEPHERD WHO RESCUES ONE LAMB WHO HAS WANDERED AWAY

“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?” There is a similar parable in Luke 15 about a shepherd who leaves the flock to rescue a lamb that is lost. Most scholars think the Luke 15 parable is talking about salvation. Jesus came to seek and to save that which was lost. I was lost in my sin, but Jesus sought me out and he saved me. In Luke 15 Jesus says there is joy in the presence of angels over one sinner who repents. Now we know Jesus is the shepherd in the parable because Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” (John 10:11)

But in this parable in Matthew 18, the focus is not a lost person, it’s on one of the little ones who believe and then “wander away.” I think it’s talking about someone who already has a relationship with Christ, and then they wander away. They don’t lose their relationship with Christ, but they get out of fellowship with Him. That can happen to any of us. As the words to that old hymn say, “Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it. Prone to leave the God I love.” (Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing).

I asked people on Facebook to send me stories about how Jesus the shepherd had rescued them. I got many great stories and I want to share a couple of them. In the 1980s I served as pastor of First Baptist Church in Oneonta, Alabama. Don and Pat had four beautiful daughters. Don had some health problems and was diagnosed with Hodgkin’s disease. After several months of treatment, Don died at the age of 43. Several years later, I had the joy of performing a marriage ceremony for Pat and her second husband, Clyde. Kelly, one of Pat’s daughters, wrote me this past week with a story about how Jesus rescued her. She gave me permission to share her story.

“You have known me since I was a child and brought me to Christ and taught me the Bible for years. You were there for my family when my father died and left my mother with four young girls to raise.

We always pray for the sick, the grieving, and the poor. However I believe that we leave a large group of people out—the broken. I have found that most people usually suffer this in silence, not letting on how sick they are on the inside; on the contrary this is the person who puts a smile on their face and lets people think that everything is lovely.

I heard once about what a shepherd used to do when he had a sheep that kept wandering off. The shepherd would break one of the legs of the wandering sheep and carry it around his neck until the leg mended. During this time the lamb became so dependent on the shepherd to provide what it needed to survive that when it was healed, it never strayed from the shepherd again. Well, that is me, and I think that is why I felt so compelled to share.”

Kelly married Patrick. They both had good jobs and they set out to enjoy the great American dream. They had a beautiful daughter and, on the surface, things seemed to be great. However, Patrick was an alcoholic and had several visits to rehab facilities, but their marriage was failing. During this time, they drifted away from God and church. When she was expecting her second child, her life fell apart. She wrote: “After a huge argument with my husband one night I knew I had to leave. The next morning, after he left for work, I packed as many belongings as I could, loaded up my daughter, and set off. At the time, I didn’t even know where I was going. By the evening, everyone was aware we were gone. Phone calls started pouring in to my cell phone. Some I ignored, others I did not. From a hotel room I spoke with my mom and she begged me to just come to her house and have dinner, and then I could go wherever I liked. I agreed. The next afternoon we pulled in the driveway to find her standing there. All she said was, ‘My God, you look like the Grapes of Wrath. Get out of the car.’ We were there for over 2 years. I was sick and weighed less than 100 lbs. My mom and Clyde, nursed me as if I were a child.

I started going back to the church where I was brought up and I remember sobbing through almost every service. I was so heartbroken. Devastated, angry, bitter, guilt-ridden, you know all the adjectives. During this time, I got divorced, lost my job during the housing market crash, lost my house, and lost a lot of so-called friends.

That is when God sent an unlikely person to my door—an old high school friend who also went to our church. After many talks he finally said, ‘You are not the girl I remember. You are sarcastic, which is only veiled anger, by the way. You have forgotten what you are here for. You are here to Praise God. You have got to get your act together, sister.’ I guess sometimes we all need someone to hold a mirror up to us and show us where the real problems are hiding.

Then one day, I don’t even remember the exact circumstance, but I fell on my face and I handed it all over to God. I asked Him to save my children’s father and to change me. I am happy to report I got to watch my ex-husband and my daughter baptized that very year.

I am at a point of restoration now. In August of this year, on what would have been my 15th wedding anniversary, Patrick, my ex-husband, asked me to marry him again. I wish I could say

all obstacles are gone, but you know that the devil hates it when you are on the good road and he will pull out all kinds of things to trip you up, but we put our armor on every morning and trust God to guide our steps.

I thought that you might could use a little of my story to help that person, that sits in silence, broken. So...this is for the sheep who have wandered from God. He will find you, carry you, and He will provide all that you need."

Are you like Kelly? Have you wandered away the Shepherd of your soul? You may be sitting in church, but your mind and your heart is far from God. You may be watching me on television because you haven't set foot in a church for many years. Today, the great Shepherd is seeking you. He wants to draw you back to His heart.

3. THE SHEPHERD IS HAPPIER ABOUT A RESCUED LAMB THAN ABOUT THE SAFE SHEEP

"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." The shepherd had 100 sheep. Just before he was ready to bed them down, he began to count them, "...95, 96, 97, 98, 99...Whoa, I'm missing one! Hey, where's Snowflake? I haven't seen her all afternoon." Then the Shepherd does something surprising; he leaves the other 99 sheep and sets off to find the single lost lamb. Remember, that's what God is like.

Have you ever heard the statement, "The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few?" You might think some philosopher like Karl Marx said that but they are the words of Mr. Spock in Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan in 1982. Just before he stepped into the isolation chamber to fix the dilithium crystal which would be fatal he said, "Jim, the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few."

But Jesus is concerned with every single person. Many folks think the shepherd is foolish to leave the 99 sheep in order to search for one lamb. After all, you have to factor in some attrition, or depreciation, what's the big deal if only one is lost? You still have the 99. It's only a 1% loss! But with God, every individual matters.

I believe Jesus could have told a parable about a shepherd who had a million sheep and one was lost, and the shepherd left the 999,999 safe sheep and gone after one. Why? Because it is the character of our God to love an individual. If you were the only person on earth who was lost and needed a Savior, I think Jesus would have still come to earth and died on a cross for you.

Look at the person sitting next to you. Do you realize how important they are to God? Turn to them and say, "You are important to God."

We've all heard of the San Francisco 49ers. But based on this parable, every church has a group that we could call the faithful "99ers." You are the ones who have a growing, maturing walk with the Lord. You haven't wandered away. You are the solid core of believers who give faithfully, serve unselfishly, and pray fervently. We wouldn't exist as a church without you

99ers. But do you know what makes God happier than when all of us 99ers gather to worship? God rejoices over one single lamb that is rescued.

Another one of my Facebook friends, Joye Johnson wrote of her rescue; "I was born in a Christian home, and come to know the Lord at an early age, but when I was 13 I drifted off and over the next few years I was drawn into spiritual deception that eventually led me to India to become a part of an Eastern cult. One day on a dusty road in India, a group of young believers shared with us hippies the love of Jesus. As I listened big, warm tears flowed down my face. That was the beginning of a personal revival, which would take another 12 months to bear fruit. Eventually while I was listening to Bob Dylan sing, "You got to serve somebody," I made the choice to serve Jesus. My parents had prayed and wept buckets of tears for me to come back to Jesus, and He brought me full circle. I have claimed Ezekiel 34:16 where God says, "I will search for the lost and bring back the strays." That's how the Shepherd rescued this wandering lamb."

The Shepherd rejoices every time a Kelly or a Joye come back to Him. In the same way, we should rejoice over every wandering Christian who comes back into an intimate relationship with the Shepherd.

4. LIKE JESUS, WE SHOULD CONDUCT SEARCH AND RESCUE MISSIONS TO THOSE WHO ARE M.I.A.

"Your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost." We believe and teach that we should share the gospel with everyone. In other words, each of us should practice personal evangelism, telling the lost how they can enter into a personal relationship with Jesus. We should go after lost people.

In addition to evangelism, we should be active in searching for those who at one time were active in worshipping and serving the Lord, but they have now dropped out. They are MIA, missing in action, or in the case of the church, they are missing in attendance.

But this is where the parable takes on a new meaning. We aren't just the sheep, we should be the hands and arms and feet of the Great Shepherd. We should be going out on search and rescue missions to those who have wandered away from God.

I'm often asked how many members we have at Green Acres. I have to admit when I give the answer over 15,000 members, I feel little like I'm lying. I usually cover it up with the humorous statement, "We have 15,000 members, but the FBI couldn't find half of them." That's cute, but the truth is, we know who they are and where they are—or at least we know where they AREN'T. They aren't here, they are missing in action.

I asked Ken Warren to dig up some data for me. We don't have any way of tracking worship attendance, but we can track attendance in SMBS, and we keep a record when someone gives an offering to the church. As of this past week, we have exactly 15,173 members. But over the last 12 months, about 50% (7,573) haven't attended SMBS, and 10,373 (68%) didn't give a penny to support the ministry of GABC.

If we are going to conduct a search and rescue mission it involves three stages. First you have to be aware. The Shepherd realized a lamb was missing. Are you aware of those who are MIA? I asked you to look at the person next to you, but now I want you to look around and ask, "Who ISN'T here?" Who are the people who used to be in Sunday Morning Bible Study Class but now they are MIA? Who are the people who used to sing in choir, but now they are MIA? Who are the people who used to be faithful to attend, but now they are spiritual dropouts? Will you be the one to help them back into the fold?

Step two: you must care. Do you even care that people who used to be a part of your group or your ministry has wandered away? In Genesis 4 after Cain killed his brother, God asked him, "Where is your brother?" Cain said, "Am I my brother's keeper?" The answer to that question is, "Yes." We are to care for one another. Do you even care about those who are missing? You must be aware, care, and then simply dare to go after them. It's a lot easier to just stay and enjoy the fellowship of the other 99ers. But I dare you to obey Galatians 6:1 which says, "Brothers if some is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted."

CONCLUSION

Years ago before the age of radio and television, oratory was entertainment. Crowds used to fill auditoriums to hear orators express their vocal skills by quoting or reading pieces of literature. Before the invention of microphones and amplifiers, all the actors were also orators, because they needed to project their voice with great volume. In one particular gathering a well-known actor thrilled the crowd with his masterful use of his voice. As an encore, he asked for requests from the audience. A well-known old pastor stood up and asked the actor to quote the 23rd Psalm. The actor accepted the request on the condition that after he quoted Psalm 23 the preacher would also quote it.

The orator sipped his water, gathered his thoughts, and then began to speak in a melodious voice, "The Lord is my Shepherd. I shall not want. He maketh me lie down in green pastures, He leadeth me beside the still water ..." As he quoted the Psalm his voice would change timbre, inflection, and volume—the audience was spellbound. When he came to the last verse, his voice rose in a controlled crescendo, and the crowd jumped to their feet and gave him a thunderous ovation.

When the applause died down, he invited the old pastor to quote the same Psalm. The Pastor came to the front and began "The Lord IS my Shepherd, I shall not want ..." His voice was worn and weak from thousands of sermons, and he had the twang of a country dialect, but there was something special about the way he delivered it. As he said, "He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul." the crowd grew silent and attentive. Finally he finished quietly, "My cup runneth over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever." A hush descended on the crowd. The silence was finally broken as the famous actor wiped a tear from his eye and said, "Do you know the difference? I know the Psalm, but this man knows the Shepherd."

Do you know God as your strong Shepherd? Can you say today, "the Lord is MY Shepherd" or does it seem to you that the Lord is "a" Shepherd or "the" Shepherd. The Shepherd is seeking you today if you are lost and He will carry to His flock if you are lonely. When you know Him as a Strong Shepherd, you don't have to be afraid of anything or anybody!

Maybe you came here today feeling you are lost and all alone. There is a verse in Isaiah 40:11 that gives us a beautiful picture of God the Shepherd. It says, "He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young."

Do you sense the Creator of the universe; the Good Shepherd is gathering you in His arms of love and carrying you close to His heart? His arms are found right here in the church, the Body of Christ. You need a flock where some other sheep can be there for you. All of us here are dumb, directionless, and defenseless sheep. But we have a Shepherd who leads us and feeds us and loves us. If you need a flock, I invite you to join this little flock called Green Acres, because all sheep love green acres!

OUTLINE

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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes