

Two Ninety And Nines

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In song and story, Christians are familiar with the ninety and nine and the one lost sheep. The example of the seeking shepherd is picturesquely portrayed in sermon. Striking artistic masterworks show the drama of finally finding and freeing the entrapped animal. Evangelists and evangelistic preachers effectively employ the story to impress hearers of God's sacrificial love. Told and retold, sung and pictured, it is a blessed exhortation and encouragement.

It may come as a surprise to some to learn that Jesus gave two stories of the ninety and nine, on two different occasions, to two different audiences, telling the story in two different ways, teaching two different lessons, making two different applications.

Each account merits separate study. Those who endeavor to use Scripture according to its clear intent will employ the accounts in distinctly different ways. Those who drink deep from the wells of revealed truth benefit from similar yet distinctly different nectars.

That Jesus would use a similar story in different ways is not really surprising. He and Old Testament writers employed the shepherd-sheep relationship in a great variety of ways.¹ Jesus did so for other teaching as well. Much that He taught in the sermon on the mount (Matt 5:1) is also proclaimed in the plain (Luke 6:17). Much of what He taught His disciples (Matt 5:1; 8:1) He taught in the valley to a multitude (Luke 6:19; 7:1). The same teaching was given in the sermon on the mount (Matt 5:29-30) and again in answer to a question from the disciples (Matt 18:8-9). Surely a notable event of sacrificial dedication can permit more than one application.

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The more familiar passage, Luke 15:3-6, will be examined first, and then Matthew 18:12-13. The purpose is to ascertain just what Jesus was teaching, how He used a single typical event in two different ways.

Luke 15:3-6

Persons and events of the account in Luke 15 loom large. Doctrinal truth concerning God and the work of the Son of God is vividly portrayed. But the setting is neither comment on a current event nor doctrinal discussion; it is a retort to improper criticism.

Context. This parable of the lost sheep was related for the instruction and correction of scribes and Pharisees who murmured because Jesus received and ate with publicans and sinners (vv 1-2). This teaching of the Pharisees that a Jew was not to eat or fellowship with sinners was so ingrained in Peter that only following special instruction did he agree to go to the house of Cornelius (Acts 10:14, 28) and even later refused to eat with Gentiles (Gal 2:12). These departures were in spite of the example and instruction of Jesus.

The "publicans and sinners" (v 1) who drew near to Jesus to hear Him were not Gentiles; they were Jews. But they were despised and shunned by the Pharisees. The legalistic judgment of these Pharisees was so strong that they not only refrained from contact themselves but they also felt qualified to condemn the conduct of Jesus. Legalists act as God both legislatively and judicially -- they authoritatively decide what pleases God then they decide who pleases God. They invariably exceed what is revealed in Scripture, and often actually oppose basic teachings of Scripture in their detailed authoritarian interpretations.

Jesus directly meets their accusation, speaking "unto them" the parables of the lost sheep (vv 4-7), lost coin (vv 8-10), and lost son (vv 11-32). He does not deal with their criticizing Him nor with the legalistic pattern of their charge. He contrasts God's seeking sinners with the Pharisees' shunning sinners.

His reply to them stresses the value of each human life. In the three parables, the value of the lost object increases. A single sheep might be worth a week's wages. A lost coin might represent several months' value, plus sentimental value. One of two sons in a culture where sons are especially important places the value exceedingly high. The Pharisees placed negative value on publicans and sinners; Jesus declares each one is of great value.

The relation of the three parables of His answer further manifests decreasing effort involved in finding the lost. The shepherd endures considerable hardship. The woman sweeps and searches thoroughly.

The father prays and anticipates (v 20). Free choice of a prodigal son leaves the father anxious but waiting. The Pharisees still need to learn that they are sick sinners who need to repent (Luke 5:30-32). Inanimate objects, even the winds and waves (Mark 4:39), respond to the voice of the Master; but willful, needy human beings refuse to come to the Savior (John 10:40) or turn back (Luke 18:23).

Identifications. Figures of speech are based on observable likenesses. Parables incorporate many likenesses. The parallel may not always be exact, but the reader or listener needs to consider, what does this stand for?

(1) *The Shepherd.* That the application (v 7) speaks of joy in heaven seems to limit identification of the seeking shepherd in the analogy to (1) God, (2) Christ, or (3) those who preach repentance. Since the parable is in reply to charges that "this man" (Jesus) receiveth sinners and eateth with them (v 2), the seeking shepherd is clearly to be understood as Jesus Himself.

That the action of such a shepherd is not unusual is beautifully expressed. Any shepherd would so act. The force of the parable is personally directed to the Pharisees and scribes, "What man of you?" (v 4). Possibly none of these scribes or Pharisees had ever tended a flock of sheep, but they were well acquainted with the practices and standards of sheep herding upon which the comparison is made. They would so act, even if they had never themselves actually done so.

The parable is simplicity itself. Jesus tells the Pharisees and the scribes that they do the same thing that He is doing, they in the case of only a lost sheep, He in the case of a lost soul. The argument is thus *ad hominem* but as justifying a right deed by one that is equally right in the case of the objector. The argument is at the same time from the less to the greater, from a sheep to a man. If a Pharisee would do for a lost sheep what is sketched here, shall Jesus not do at least the equal for a lost human being?"

(2) *The Sheep.* Since the lost sheep clearly represents a human being needing salvation, perhaps the 99 can be understood as representing those in this world who have already turned to the Savior. The "friends and neighbors" (v 6) who experience joy in heaven (v 7) are in the parable of the coin identified as including the angels of God (v 10) or at least in the presence of angels.

Identification of elements of the figure is of necessity two-fold; Jesus designed it that way. The shepherd as Jesus used the parable was "any one of you" and the sheep were any flock, the lost sheep was

any lost sheep--a hypothetical situation, true to life but not actual fact. The second identification is the one for which Jesus built the first relationship. The lost sheep stands for the publican or sinner (v 1). The shepherd is the One whom they accused of improper conduct (v 2). That Jesus is God is evident throughout the parable.

Concerning the number, one hundred, it is a convenient round number which probably has no special interpretative significance. The size of a flock that one shepherd could handle was about one hundred, occasionally as many as one hundred and fifty. The scribes and Pharisees thus would understand Jesus to be speaking of a typical flock which any one of them might conceivably serve as shepherd.

(3) *The Wilderness*. Another identification not crucial to the point of the parable but possible of misunderstanding is the reference to "wilderness." It seems strange to some that the shepherd would leave the 99 in the wilderness and go after that sheep which was lost (v 4). Wilderness simply denotes uncultivated plains, pasturage, in opposition to tilled field. It was open, uninhabited country suitable for grazing sheep. The 99 in the care of an undershepherd were not being left in danger and presumably reach home (v 6) in the usual time.

Although the wilderness is not a dreadful place when with the flock and following the shepherd, it can be a place of great peril for a single lost sheep. He may wander in difficult terrain. He may (as often pictured) fall over a crevice or get caught in brambles. It is urgent that the shepherd set out quickly to locate a lost sheep. Likewise, the peril of eternal hell fire for those who do not know the Savior corresponds in urgency.

Reactions. With these identifications providing the framework, the lessons intended by Jesus can be considered next. Seven areas merit notice.

(1) *A shepherd manifests faithful dedication to his task*. The people were fully familiar with different levels of shepherds. A hireling (John 10:12-13) did not have the heart or conduct of a shepherd. A field shepherd might have one or more assistants with whom to entrust the sheep. A field shepherd might be under a chief shepherd (cf I Pet 5:4). The chief shepherd might himself be under an owner shepherd. In this parable, however, there is no hint of greater responsibility; the field shepherd seems to own the hundred sheep (cf "my sheep" v 6).

It is probably important that the field shepherd appears as the owner. This hypothetical ownership has its point for the scribes and Pharisees. Regarding the Good Shepherd, it is a claim both to be the creator of the world and even more to be the shepherd of the flock promised in the Old Testament. He is "owner" of even these despised,

battered sheep of the house of Israel. Publicans and sinners are precious lost sheep.

(2) *A shepherd is fully aware of each sheep in his flock.* The shepherd knows each one individually, probably has named each one, and calls each by name (John 10:3). The creator God knows each human being, up and out or down and out, fully.

The shepherd frequently counted his flock and so would discover the absence of a sheep and ascertain which one was missing soon after the sheep had wandered off. The shepherd would count as the flock entered and left the fold. Throughout the day he would frequently count. When the count revealed one missing, he would immediately act. He would know which one had wandered off. Like a good shepherd, God is aware of and concerned for each individual in creation. He is specially concerned for the needs of publicans and sinners.

(3) *A shepherd considers each sheep important.* God places great value on each individual. Men in some cultures have treated human life as easily expendable (the lives of others, at least). An important point of this parable is that God so greatly loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son (John 3:16). The Good Shepherd is willing to lay down His life for His sheep (John 10:11, 15). That is the extreme price anyone can pay.

An attitude typical of the West, the relative loss of only one out of a hundred, would not have been consciously considered in the East. In the East total care for each sheep was a sense of duty. No matter how large the flock, the shepherd went to the aid of the needy sheep. The illustration is not so much of a compassionate shepherd as it is of a true shepherd. He has responsibility for the care of each sheep in the flock. A wandering sheep is not expendable.

When a shepherd was responsible to another, he needed to give account of every animal under his care. If a sheep was devoured by a wild animal, a rent portion of ear or hoof might be carried to the owner as evidence of what had happened (Amos 3:12). But Jesus did not build His parable on commercial worth or stewardship responsibility. Jesus presented a genuine heart concern of the seeking shepherd for the lost sheep.

No price can be placed on the value of a single soul (Matt 16:26). The price of redemption paid by the sending Father and the submissive Son demonstrates that the value of each sheep is incomparable. The publicans and sinners which scribes and Pharisees despised were of utmost value in the eyes of God.

(4) *A shepherd desires the well-being of each sheep.* The shepherd is especially concerned for the needs of lost sheep. He knows their condition better than they know it themselves. As a sheep wanders away from the flock, attracted by movement or food, he may not notice that he is leaving the flock. He may follow interesting and attractive pursuits for some time. His departure may be willful, but more likely he has been deceived and merely wandered away. If not found by the shepherd before becoming entangled, he may be quite unaware of being alone.

But when some noise or unusual disturbance brings awareness of his condition, a sheep cries distinctly. His cries may enable the shepherd to find him more quickly. The shepherd is not placid till he hears a cry. He became aware of a lost sheep and began his search long before the sheep sensed his need. So in the spiritual realm, God draws long before sinners are really aware of their great need.

A lost sheep is away from the pasture and the shepherd's care it needs. It will not return on its own and must be sought. A strayed sheep is destitute both of the instinct necessary to find its way and of any weapon of self-defense. It is a prey to any beast which may meet it; it deserves, as no other being in nature, the label "lost." There is nothing more helpless than a lost sheep except a lost sinner.

Elsewhere, God clearly teaches that all have sinned (Rom 3:23). The 99 just persons who need not repent (v 7) do not represent the majority of mankind. God clearly loves those who are saved and already in the fold. His love for His own provides a basis for showing that He has much great love and concern for each one yet lost. Those the Pharisees despise and would shun God seeks to reach.

Sheep wander. Men freely sin. They are to be blamed. But as Jesus constructs His parable, it is not "if a sheep wanders off" but instead "if he lose one of them" (v 4). The spotlight is on the concern of the shepherd, not on the waywardness that causes the sheep to wander. No blame is involved. It is fact. Men precious in God's sight need to be brought back to the fold.

(5) *A shepherd diligently seeks to save the lost.* Pharisees shun; God seeks. The conduct of the shepherd in Jesus' parable is typical. It would be characteristic of any shepherd ("which of you?"). Any shepherd would immediately turn the flock over to another and set forth to find the one lost sheep. Any proper shepherd would persist in his search "until he find it" (v 4). The shepherd considers no trouble, sacrifice or suffering too great in seeking the lost sheep and carrying it home.

The fact that the 99 were left behind in entire safety is so obvious that Jesus did not clutter up his parable by inserting an explanation. No explanation was needed, for a shepherd normally left the sheep in the care of an undershepherd or a fellow shepherd in such an instance.

A true shepherd manifests total honesty. He is fully responsible for the sheep entrusted to his care. His every decision is for their well-being, not for his own convenience or preference. Out with the flock, with only God watching above, a good shepherd was one totally loyal to his task. Such full dedication ought to characterize all who watch for the souls of men.

A good shepherd was well trained, an expert, fully qualified to meet all emergencies. Regularly he led the flock to water, to pasture, to the fold. In emergency he must be able to track the footprints of the straying sheep. He must know the terrain. He must be able to defend against wild animals. A good shepherd was both willing and able to rescue a lost sheep.

Jesus was not just passively condescending to socialize with publicans and sinners; His contacts with them were in order to accomplish an important spiritual reclamation. The shepherd puts forth deliberate effort to locate the lost sheep. He leaves the open pasture, goes forth to the difficult terrain, and persists until he finds it. In spite of all hardships during the long search through forests, cliffs or gorges, the shepherd continues to seek until he has found the lost sheep.

Then having found it, the shepherd does not attempt to lead a single sheep back, nor does it likely have strength for the journey. The shepherd places it over his shoulders, holds it in place, and carries it home in order to care for cuts and bruises and inner fears. The attitude of the seeking, suffering shepherd is a condemnation of the attitude of the accusing scribes and Pharisees.

(6) *A faithful shepherd is greatly honored.* The community honors success (v 6), but really honors the sterling character which brought about the success. A true shepherd was a community hero. His reception would correspond to that welcome extended by a small American town to one of its own who had just walked on the moon.

Jesus does not here stress the honor characteristically extended to a faithful, successful shepherd but continues to emphasize the worth of each sheep. The publicans and sinners so despised by the Pharisees when reclaimed are of great value in the eyes of the shepherd and the community.

The joy of shepherd and friends regarding the returned sheep is in contrast to the critical attitude of the scribes and Pharisees. The

shepherd rejoices when he finds the sheep. There is no upbraiding of the wandering sheep, nor murmuring at the trouble. Back home he invites friends to rejoice with him, which they would do, rather than criticize the shepherd. In fact, there would be in most villages a great expression of honor and respect for such action as well as mutual rejoicing, a feature certainly familiar to the scribes and Pharisees and radically contrary to their expressed disapproval.

(7) *A successful shepherd shares his joy with others.* There is great joy when one lost sheep has been found. The shepherd's joy is not that of the end of a distasteful task; it is personal joy over the well-being of the sheep that was lost. His great joy is first displayed in the tender treatment of the battered sheep as he carries the sheep on his shoulders.

His personal joy is the reason for calling friends and neighbors to rejoice with him. The safety and well-being of one who has been wayward is adequate cause for community rejoicing. It is not their sheep, but they can enter into joyful thanksgiving over his rescue.

This feature of neighbors rejoicing even though it was not their sheep provides the analogy for the heavenly revelation Jesus shares with these criticizing Pharisees. Jesus had talked with Nicodemus about earthly things, especially being born again (John 3:1-12). He indicated to Nicodemus that He could tell him of heavenly things (v 12) because He had come down from heaven (v 13). With similar authority Jesus emphasizes his sharing heavenly information with "I say unto you." He alone can speak first-hand of heavenly realities. "Note the tone of certainty in Jesus' pronouncements on what happens in heaven."³

So far as can be known from Scripture, angels do not experience repentance. They that fell are set in evil character. They that are holy are firmly set in holy character. Nor do they "own" men as men own sheep. They are bystanders to God's redemptive activity, a grand cheering section, rejoicing over every conversion. Whereas scribes and Pharisees murmur, holy beings in the presence of God rejoice.

They do rejoice over the 99 who need no repentance. The comparison is not "rather than" but "more than." There is far greater rejoicing among the heavenly host for each returning sinner than for the great company of those already redeemed. One person of the group despised and avoided by the Pharisees who are murmuring against Jesus, when that one repents, is a stimulus to genuine love in the courts of heaven. The Good Shepherd there rejoices over one of His own which is found. Heavenly friends and neighbors likewise rejoice. Heaven is moved by each earthly repentance.

Despise not those for whom Christ died. Enter into the endeavor to seek and to save that which is lost. Every human being is an object of God's love and concern. This evangelistic ninety and nine is clear and powerful.

Matthew 18:12-13

Jesus used the story of the ninety and nine as recorded in Luke to teach that social outcasts are not to be despised or neglected. On the occasion recorded in Matthew 18 He used a similar account to teach His disciples (v 1) equal respect for great and small among believers.

The context of Matthew 18:12-13 is entirely different from the more familiar parable of the lost sheep recorded in Luke 15:1-7. The identification of the figures and the purpose for employing the parable are likewise different. Here it is for the benefit of the disciples (v 1) and concerning a little child (vv 2-11) that Jesus uses the likeness of a shepherd seeking his lost sheep. The negative attitude had been stressed: offend them not (vv 7-11); now a positive attitude is enjoined: seek and aid these whom the Father does not wish to perish (vv 12-14).

Context. The disciples ask about rank and respect, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (v 1). Jesus draws before them a small child who truly believes on Him (vv 2, 6). Estimation of worth is first on personal relation to the Lord. Every last one, no matter how seemingly lowly physically or socially, is to be greatly honored and respected just for the very fact that that one is a true follower of Jesus.

This truth is of primary importance for Christians. A fellow believer is in every respect to be preferred above an unbeliever. Each one who is united unto Christ has been baptized into His body. Our admiration for Jesus is to be expressed toward each one who is in Jesus. Receiving an "insignificant" believer is receiving Jesus (v 5).

The quality of character that Jesus impresses on His disciples is humility. They seem to seek to be great or to be specially recognized (v 1). Jesus sets forth an unnamed child and commends simple child-like trust both for conversion and for recognition as great in God's sight (vv 3-4).

Concern for the welfare of every believer is His next lesson (vv 6-7). Offending a true believer is very serious in God's eyes. Offenses are sure to come from unbelievers (v 7), but ought never to be caused by a disciple. Any deficiency which might be spiritually detrimental to a disciple or might cause offense to one new in the faith should be dealt with severely, for eternal results will be severe (vv 8-9).

The central lesson to the disciples is repeated (v 10), every last seemingly insignificant believer is exceedingly important to God. Three further evidences heighten this supreme importance, their angels stand before God (v 10), the incarnation and death of Christ involves a great price paid for them (v 11),⁴ and the intense desire of a shepherd (vv 12-14) illustrates the compassion and concern of God.

The following context, treatment of an offense in a local church (vv 15-20), shows that the consideration taught by this parable applies to a congregation. Each believer is important. No one is to continue to harm congregational well-being just as no habit is to be permitted which would be of spiritual harm to self or those young in the faith (vv 8-9). Anyone who causes offense is to be put out (v 17) for the benefit and well-being of the congregation. Such a sheep does not become a wolf by being put outside the flock. He is yet to be admonished as a brother, not treated as an enemy (II Thess 3:15). He will certainly not be despised by one who manifests true humility (cf Gal 6:1).

There is additional indication that the context of this parable of ninety and nine is distinctly different from the occasion in Luke 15:3-6. Connecting words show that the parable is a deliberate and significant part of Christ's teaching for His disciples. The word "for" in verse ten indicates logical continuation and explanation of His enacted explanation in answer to their question (vv 1-10). The word "moreover" (v 15) indicates further development of His discourse, but a shift to applying the principle He is teaching to a local church situation.

No single word can be interpreted apart from its context. No verse can be properly interpreted except by careful consideration of its context. The lesson of this ninety and nine has many similarities to the one in Luke 15, but is distinctly different.

Interpretation. The parable is universal in scope, any man, and presented for the judgment of the disciples with the expectation of obvious agreement. The interrogative particle used expects an unhesitating, affirmative answer. From "Father" in verse fourteen, the shepherd relation in the parable is God. In an analogy "this" stands for "that." The shepherd is identified by Jesus as representing God the Father. What is said about the compassion, seeking, joy of the shepherd applies to the Father.

(1) *God honors the genuinely humble.* This parable is an illustration, an explanation of why disciples should not despise little ones. The importance of the believing child in the sight of God is clearly the main point of the parable. At great price, with great effort, in deep concern, the shepherd goes forth to find the sheep. The effort

of attitude (v 4) by a disciple is minuscule by comparison. The end of eternal welfare (vv 8-9) is clearly worth the sacrifice and effort.

Identification of the flock is immaterial; the text names the size and calls them sheep, not flock. The one lost sheep in the parable represents "one of these little ones" (v 14). Being lost because of willful departure is not even hinted; aimless wandering and even enticement, being deceived (cf v 7) are suggested by the context.

The action of the shepherd is the principal use of the comparison. The shepherd shows immediate concern and goes forth to seek the sheep that had gone astray (v 12). He leaves the 99 with an undershepherd and goes forth himself to that greater task (cf v 1, "greatest in the kingdom"). That he goes unto the mountains only indicates one of the areas where sheep are pastured, though the effort he must expend to locate and retrieve the sheep may be greater than if the pasture were in easier terrain.

It is the comparison of importance that is the direct purpose in answering the inquiry of the disciples, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (v 1). The one in special need is of greater importance than the 99 which went not astray (v 13). The 99 are not neglected, nor left to fend for themselves, not at all unimportant to the shepherd. The one in special need merits special care. The disciples are not to be unduly concerned over who might be greatest, largest, oldest, or most experienced. Honor is not to be sought by a disciple. God will properly honor His own. The one with the greatest need merits the heart concern and attention of the Father.

The followers of Jesus are not to be like the scribes and Pharisees who do all their works to be seen of men "and love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues" (Matt 23:1-6). In a local congregation, Paul explains, "much more those members of the body, which seem to be more feeble," those we think to be less honorable, upon these we should bestow more abundant honor (I Cor 12:22-23). "These little ones" are really the greatest. Learn to honor and exalt that which may appear small but is really the genuine article.

The disciples are to learn to show respect and honor to the most needy, most "insignificant" believer. They are to follow their perfect Example; "the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matt 20:28; Mark 10:45). The disciples serve God best when they honor and help "little ones."

(2) *God seeks those who willfully wander.* That the lost sheep has "gone astray" introduces an element of willfulness which had not been prominent in Jesus' previous answer to His disciples. Childlike trust,

especially humility, was to be emulated (vv 3-4). Reception (v 5) or offense (vv 6-9) present the child as the recipient of the action. Only in presenting the great mission of incarnation does the condition of the recipient enter in: "the Son of man is come to save that which is lost" (v 11). But willful action is clearly involved in the further development of His answer as He deals with individual and congregational treatment of a brother who commits a trespass against a believer. A lost sheep is one who needs to be restored. A willfully disobedient believer deserves special effort individually (v 15), with praying associates (v 16) even the entire congregation (v 17). There is no longer higher earthly authority than the local church; the disciple is to persevere to the uttermost in his efforts to restore a wandering brother.

Jesus stresses that devoting great effort where the need is great is customary among shepherds. Any man serving properly as a field shepherd would entrust the 99 to an undershepherd and personally set forth to find the one (v 12), which is at that moment "greatest" (v 1) of the flock. Such action is not unusual; it is the pattern to be followed by every disciple of Jesus.

That such seeking is not always successful is also part of the parable. "If so be that He find it" (v 13) intimates that at times the seeking shepherd is too late. He may find only inedible remains of the carcass (Amos 3:12). He may not be able to track the animal and thus is not even looking in the right area. In the further development (vv 15-20), willful refusal persists even to refusing to hear the church. The effort is not limited to anticipated outcome. Full effort is to be expended.

(3) *God greatly rejoices when the wandering is brought back.* The seeking shepherd, when he finds his lost sheep, experiences great inner joy, above his joy for the 99 safely at home. Jesus "for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame" (Heb 12:2). There is joy "over one sinner that repenteth (Luke 15:7); there is likewise great joy over one insignificant, wayward believer who is restored to the fold.

Jesus speaks of greater joy (v 13). Although the world may not think children important, the Lord Jesus Christ used a child as an example of one worthy of greater effort on the part of the shepherd and of greater joy than the remainder of the sheep. Just so, God is concerned for each child and is not willing that one should perish (v 14).

"Here there is nothing but joy. There are no recriminations; there is no receiving back with a grudge and a sense of superior contempt;

it is all joy."⁵ A sheep accustomed to wandering might need to have its leg broken (deliberately, Heb 12:5-10) to learn the lesson of staying close to the shepherd. A parent should never discipline out of anger or for revenge, only from a heart of love and for the good of the child. The shepherd is so inwardly joyous that he desires others to rejoice with him.

Some shepherds may fail to find the sheep gone astray (vv 12-13), but "it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish" (v 14). This summation clearly points back to the initial question of the disciples (v 1) and the extensive answer of Jesus (vv 2-11). The reference to "one" of these little ones in verse fourteen cannot be to a sheep; it is a direct application by Jesus to the little child He set before them (v 2) and spoke of as this little child (v 4), one such little child (v 5), one of these little ones (v 10). In the same way that a shepherd seeks and rejoices (vv 12-13), God is intensely concerned for any little one, yea, for every last, littlest one. If the disciples learn true godly humility (v 4), they will similarly seek and rejoice.

God has chosen the foolish, weak, base, despised (I Cor 1:20-29) that He might receive the glory. Greatness is not to be sought in the haughtiness of man; greatness is to be recognized in connection with greatest need of a saint. The most needy, the most insignificant, the weakest among believers receive the great care and concern of the Father. And such should receive consideration and assistance from all who know and serve the Father. Every possible bit of energy should be expended to aid the most needy true believer.

Such has not characterized churches through the centuries nor is it characteristic of many churches today. It is true that honor and appreciation need to be shown to those who have ministered, and proper expression of appreciation is too often lacking, but honest humility, genuine concern for spiritual needs of immature believers is not universally characteristic.

The two lessons of the two ninety and nines are distinct. Each is important, and surely neither more important than the other. The evangelistic lesson may be the one more frequently preached. The humility lesson needs to be preached and practiced just as much as the evangelistic lesson. Perhaps, since there is greater need, it should be preached more frequently.

Notes:

- ¹ Warren Vanhetloo, "The Incarnate Shepherd" *Calvary Baptist Theological Journal*, Spring 1985, 20; Warren Vanhetloo, "The Shepherd Motif in the Old Testament" unpubl ThD thesis, Dallas Theol Seminary, 1965
- ² R C H Lenski, *The Interpretation of St Luke's Gospel* (Columbus: Wartburg Press, 1946) 795
- ³ Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publ Co, 1951) 404
- ⁴ Because verse 11 is omitted by the earliest Greek manuscripts and several early versions, it may have been copied from Luke 19:10; cf John A Broadus, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1886) 385. It is, of course, possible that Jesus did employ it on this occasion and another record no longer extant was used by a copyist (rather than the copyist on his own initiative taking a verse similarly dealing with the lost) giving a more full and correct record of Jesus' discourse to His disciples on this day. Inasmuch as "to seek" is so important to verse 12, it is highly unlikely that a later scribe would deliberately omit "to seek and" if utilizing Luke 19:10.
- ⁵ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew* Vol 2 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975) 186