

Introduction: We never forget Christ's care for lost and erring sheep in Matthew 18:8-20. We therefore linger on this passage, with its clear picture of Christ's shepherding concern for us, especially as we face the terrible danger of our sins on a daily basis. How timely. In our day there are lost sheep perishing on every hillside: sheep that at one time professed child-like faith in Jesus as their Good Shepherd, but who have now wandered into doubt, guilt, unbelieving lifestyles or outright denial of the faith. What are we to do, as these sheep are in danger of perishing through worldly distraction, and by following false paths to their destruction? Let us remember Jesus' shepherding compassion for lost sheep. Moreover, let us remember God the Father's compassion for His erring and wandering people in the Old Testament. Therefore, for the next two weeks, we will seek to gather as many Biblical promises and arguments as we need in order to "stand in the gap" and pray for such lost sheep – that they would indeed be rescued by Jesus' rod and staff. The days are urgent, and the dangers real. May the Lord make us an interceding church for the souls of those who wander like lost sheep (Luke 22:31-32).

Monday: read Matthew 18:10-14, 1 Corinthians 10:1-6 and Romans 10:21. Perhaps no hymn better sums up God the Father's pleading to His people to return to Him in the Old Testament than F.W. Faber's hymn quoted below. Sadly, so many in Israel were consumed by the wolves of their own unbelief, and destroyed by their refusal to repent of their lusts. As Paul says – Despite God's "holding out His hands all day long" (Rm. 10:21), pleading for the repentance of His lost people, "many of them perished because their hearts were set on evil things" (1 Cor. 10:6). Oh, may God break our hearts as we sing with tears, and plead in prayer for the lost, using this hymn:

1 *Souls of men, why will ye scatter
Like a crowd of frightened sheep?
Foolish hearts, why will ye wander
From a love so true and deep?*

2 *Was there ever kinder shepherd
Half so gentle, half so sweet,
As the Savior Who would have us
Come and gather round His feet?*

3 *There's a wideness in God's mercy,
Like the wideness of the sea;
There's a kindness in His justice,
Which is more than liberty.*

4 *There is no place where earth's sorrows
Are more felt than up in Heaven;
There is no place where earth's failings
Have such kindly judgment given.*

5 *There is plentiful redemption
In the blood that has been shed;
There is joy for all the members
In the sorrows of the Head.*

6 *For the love of God is broader
Than the measure of man's mind.
And the heart of the Eternal
Is most wonderfully kind.*

Tues/Weds: read Matthew 18:10-14 and Psalm 119:176. The need for God's urgent rescue of His own becomes clear as we remind ourselves how as sheep we are prone to wander, even as Isaiah 53:6 says: *All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.* (KJV)

Another lesser known passage about the believer wandering is Psalm 119:176: *I have strayed like a lost sheep. Seek your servant, for I have not forgotten your commands.*

What a striking dose of reality to realize that even the godliest of men, like the Psalmist, who prayed continually that God, “would not let him wander from His commands” in Psalm 119:10, did in fact experience times of wandering – even though, as the rest of verse 176 says, he treasured up God’s commands in his memory. For the rest of this week, let us ponder the depths of our wandering, with the help of this last verse in Psalm 119!

Meditate and Pray: *“Father, we confess that the verdict on our lives, were it not for the long arm of your redeeming grace, is that we wander like lost sheep from your commands. Even though we **know** those commands, and **know** that those who transgress them deserve God’s punishment, we nevertheless find ourselves wandering on a daily basis. “Who will rescue us from this body of death? Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 7:25)!” May this be the verse to which we return in our lostness again and again. Help us for the rest of these Bible notes on our wandering as your sheep, to look frequently to Christ Jesus, the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for His sheep, and who interposes in prayer when we wander again and again (Luke 22:32). Amen.”*

Thursday: read Matthew 18:8-20. Let us never grow comfortable with our tendency to wander into sin. Matthew 18:15-20 is in the Bible *precisely because of the terrible danger of sin as it is described in Matthew 18:8-9*. Think of it this way. I wonder if any of us would continue in certain practices of sin if we knew that such sin would cause us to lose a limb? Would we allow one of our brothers and sisters to continue in such sin when they were in danger not only of losing limbs, but even of losing their souls eternally? No! We would change our behavior in order to do whatever was necessary to spare our limbs or eyes, as well as their souls! “How much more”, says Jesus, should we realize that *continuing in sin means the loss of our whole bodies in Hell!* Cut off the offending member, so that your life may be saved! This is the urgent argument that Jesus makes.

Meditate and Pray: *“Lord Jesus, help us as a church to maintain this balance in our exercise of loving church discipline. Help us to hate the sin, but love the sheep. Moreover, help us to know the difference between the needed, vigorous grace that rescues sinning sheep and the weak compromise which emboldens sheep to **continue to wander in their own way!** This calls for wisdom which only you have, Lord Jesus. So then, please be present in every deliberation of this church’s elders, as we pray and counsel erring sheep to repent and return to the sheep fold! You promise that where two or three elders are gathered for this purpose, that you will be present with them (Matthew 18:20). Amen, Lord. So let it be.”*

Fri/Sat/Sun: read Matthew 5:29-30 and 18:8-20. Let us hear the words of Dr. Sinclair Ferguson as he sums up the argument of Matthew 18:8-9 about the holy mortification of the sinning members of our body. For this is indeed the necessary background for our study of the subject of church discipline in Matthew 18. We cannot respond with the necessary concern and pathos as a church (for the lost and wandering), unless this argument about the amputation of sin is not clearly understood.

I quote from Dr. Ferguson’s book on the Sermon on the Mount, [Kingdom Life in a Fallen World](#), and his comments on Matthew 5:29-30:

How then, can we keep our way pure? Jesus' vivid illustrations suggest a number of important general principles.

- 1) Realize where yielding to sinful lusts will lead you. Jesus says that hell is the direction in which all sin leads (Matthew 5:29-30). Fix that in your mind.
- 2) Deal with the real cause of your sin. If it is the right eye that causes you to sin, says Jesus, gouge it out. Could we substitute something else? No, says Jesus.

Most of us know what He means. We offer God substitutes. If we can hold on to our favorite lust, we are prepared to sacrifice other things. We will do more Bible reading, attend times of prayer, give more sacrificially. We may even be prepared to give far more to the Lord's work – anything except give up our 'right eye'. But failure to 'gouge it out' cannot be remedied by substitute offerings of obedience or sacrifice."

3. Act decisively, immediately, even if it must be painful. Jesus gives a horrific description of what other New Testament writers calls 'mortification.' It is like gouging out your eye or cutting off a limb. There will be pain, tears, blood. There will be 'withdrawal symptoms' after the amputation. The consequences seem almost unbearable. But the drastic nature of the remedy is simply the index of the radical danger of the sin. It is not a situation for negotiation. Obedience cannot be negotiated, nor can heaven and hell.

- 4) Realize especially that your lust is not the whole of your life, and weigh against its influence all that will be yours by abandoning it. It is better to lose your eye and keep your body than to lose all in hell, Jesus states.

What happens when we are caught up in some specific sin? We become the objects of blackmail. We think, or Satan says, "If you deal with this sin as Jesus says, what will be left for you? Think of the long road back to spiritual recovery. Think of what you will lose if you say no." Such is the nature of the attraction and bondage of sin that it becomes all-consuming. It demands all we can give. But Jesus gives us the hope of a new perspective. Gouge out the offending eye, but save your life. Yes, you may have committed sin the memory of which you will never be able to erase, even though it may be forgiven. But you will have taken steps on the way to life and turned away from the doorway to death. Do not be deceived into a hopeless abandonment **to** sin.

Amen. May God help us all to see the great hope for resurrection and a new beginning which comes from mortifying our sins and lusts. As hymn # 491 in our Trinity hymnal puts it:

*1 Take me, O my Father, take me;
Take me, save me, through Thy Son;
That which Thou wouldst have me, make me,
Let Thy will in me be done.*

*Long from Thee my footsteps straying,
Thorny proved the way I trod;
Weary come I now, and praying,
Take me to Thy love, my God.*

*2 Fruitless years with grief recalling,
Humbly I confess my sin;
At Thy feet, O Father, falling,
To Thy household take me in.
Freely now to Thee I proffer
This relenting heart of mine;
Freely life and love I offer,
Gift unworthy love like Thine.*