

“The Wandering Christian”
Matthew 18:10-20
December 9, 2018

INTRODUCTION:

This passage continues to deal with those Jesus refers to as his “little ones,” a phrase describing not literal children but Jesus’ spiritual children. While the previous passage warned against causing one of these little ones to stumble, this passage tells us what to do if one should wander away. Jesus uses the metaphor of sheep, who are prone to wander away. Our translation of verse 12 speaks of one sheep who has “gone astray,” but I prefer the translation of wandering. The Greek word here is *planomenon*, from which we get our English word “planet,” because the planets, unlike the stars, appear to wander through the sky.

This word “wander” describes the way many fall away from Christ. They don’t normally just wake up one day and decide to walk away from the faith. The process is far more gradual than that, like a sheep slowly eating its way across a pasture and drifting from the rest of the flock. I have seen this sad tale played out too many times during my years as a pastor. Someone once active in church gradually distances himself from the rest of the church. Volunteer service is dropped, followed by a gradual decline in church attendance. This wandering one might think at first that he can keep up a pattern of Bible reading and prayer on his own, but over time that grows more irregular and then may even stop altogether. This wandering one eventually becomes a former follower of Christ, a completely lost sheep.

Frederick Bruner describes these “little ones” who wander as “three-soil Christians.” He is referring to Jesus’ parable of the soils, which is one of the most important of all Jesus’ parables. God’s word is sown in three soils in which it fails to grow and bear fruit. There is the hard soil where Satan comes and snatches away the seed of God’s word, the shallow soil where the word withers during hard times and the thorny soil where the word is choked out by the cares of this world. In all three cases, these people had exposure to the life-changing word of God but eventually wandered away. Today’s passage describes how fourth soil Christians are to love “three-soil Christians.” It begins by telling us about God’s attitude toward his wandering children. Since he loves them desperately and passionately, we should too. And then we are instructed about the specific actions we are to take toward these wandering children, actions summarized by loving discipline.

I. The Appropriate Attitude toward the Wandering Christian – vv. 10-14

Three times in these verses Jesus speaks of the Father's love for these wandering, "three-soil" Christians. First, Jesus reports of something happening in heaven. **"For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven."** Angels are envoys from God. Though the Bible doesn't teach that there is one "guardian angel" assigned to each follower of Christ, it clearly does teach that angels are sent from heaven to earth to serve God's people. The author of Hebrews speaks of angels like this. **"Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?"** (1:14).

Why, then, are these angels in heaven in this verse rather than on the earth engaged in such ministry? And what is the significance of saying that they **"always see the face of my Father"**? I think the idea is that they are awaiting direction from the Father, and he keeps them close at hand in order that they might be sent without delay to minister to these wandering souls. In any case, the central truth is that these souls are precious to the Father.

The second statement of the Father's love for this group uses the well-known metaphor of the shepherd leaving the ninety-nine sheep in order to pursue the one wandering sheep. So great is his love for the one wandering sheep that he is willing to put at risk the rest of the flock and go out in pursuit of that wandering one. Shepherding was quite common in Jesus' day, but not so much in our suburban culture. I think the closest parallel is the attitude of a parent when a child wanders away.

Wendy and I had a memorable experience of that years ago when we were visiting the Smithsonian museum in Washington. In the middle of the American History museum, we realized that our daughter, Meredith, at the time around four or five years old, was missing. We called for her and began frantically searching everywhere. With each passing moment of no success in our search, our fear grew until bordering on all-out panic. Then, Meredith jumped out from a place where she had been hiding, considering this all to be nothing more than a fun game of hide-and-seek. Our response was the same as any parent's would have been—immense relief followed immediately by some anger. The relief part of that response is reported to be God's response when one of his sheep returns to the fold. **"And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray"** (v. 13). One thing the shepherd does not do is allow the sheep to wander away without an attempt to find it. This is just what parents do too. When Meredith was temporarily lost, it would never have entered our minds to say, "Oh well, we still have two other children. Let's just go ahead and leave and be content with the two remaining ones."

The third statement of the Father's concern for the wandering is the concluding statement in verse 14. **"So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish."** The word for "perish"

is in the middle voice, which refers to something one does to oneself. One commentator helpfully translated this “self-destruct” to capture this nuance. Those who are wandering away are in the process of self-destruction. Whenever a person drifts away from God, it is a self-destructive act. The wanderer thinks that he is walking a path of liberation when he is actually on a path of bondage and destruction. It is the person attempting to slake his thirst by drinking ever more salt water. But this is not from God. He resists such self-destructive behavior and calls upon us to do the same.

What is Jesus asking of us in going after these wandering Christians who are so beloved by God? The central command in the opening verse tells us. **“See that you do not despise one of these little ones.”** That is unexpected because it seems to ask too little. The Father’s love for his wandering sheep has been described so strongly that we would expect Jesus to say something stronger than, “See that you don’t hate those the father loves so much.” At first glance, it seems that this command is too easy. Of course we don’t hate those who have wandered away. But could it be the case that Jesus is saying something far more convicting? Perhaps he is saying that our failure to pursue and go after these wandering sheep is to hate them. I think that is exactly what he is saying. To despise someone is to be indifferent and apathetic about them. Jesus is saying that when we excuse our apathy and inaction with statements like, “Well, she’s made her bed and now she’s going to have to sleep in it,” we are despising others.

There’s one other important point I need to make from these verses, one that is easily missed. Did you notice how often the word “one” is used in these verses? “Don’t despise *one* of these little ones,” Jesus says. The shepherd goes after just *one* of the sheep, and it is not the Father’s will that even *one* of these little ones should perish. Frederick Bruner words it like this. “Human thinking says, ‘Let it go; we have ninety-nine.’ The Father’s thinking is, ‘There were one hundred; where is my one?’ Jesus is trying to convert us to ‘the mentality of the one,’ to the importance of the statistically unimportant. His command is again: Think Little!” One of the strengths of our American culture is that we have a love for efficient, macro solutions to problems. One of the weaknesses of our culture is that we have a love for efficient, macro solutions. The wandering Christian needs an inefficient, micro solution. Our next point helps us understand what that solution looks like.

II. The Appropriate Action toward the Wandering Christian – vv. 15-20

The action urged by Jesus is the same action needed from parents for their children—loving discipline. Our culture sees love and discipline as being opposed to one another. The widespread belief is that to love someone is to leave them alone, to let them go their own way. God classifies that approach as one of hatred. **“Whoever spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him**

is diligent to discipline him” (Proverbs 13:24). Churches that practice church discipline are loving people, while those churches neglecting it are guilty of hatred even while congratulating themselves for being so loving and accepting.

The disciplinary process Jesus outlines here is fairly straightforward, and I don't think it requires a great deal of commentary. So let me point out several things that may not be quite so evident. First, it is sin that begins the disciplinary process. Does that mean all sin? Obviously not, because we all sin far more frequently than we recognize. In context, the sin that Jesus says should be disciplined is repeated, self-destructive and unrepentant sin. It is the kind of sin that is causing a person to wander away from the Lord.

Second, it is the sin of professing Christians that is to be confronted like this. Notice that it says, “If your *brother* sins.” We have no command from God to correct the immoral behavior of those outside the Church. It is those who have publicly declared an allegiance to Christ, but whose behavior is at odds with such a profession, who are to be disciplined.

Third, don't ignore the impact of the word “Go.” The Church often and rightly emphasizes that word in the Great Commission to go and make disciples. But it appears here also, and should be emphasized here as well. It indicates the intentionality of taking the initiative and not waiting for a person to come to us.

Fourth, efforts are to be made to keep the circle of those involved with this as small as possible. Always start with the smallest step, which in this case is to go privately to the person who is practicing unrepentant, self-destructive sin. You don't need to go to the pastor first. You don't need to recruit an army of “prayer partners” or counselors to help you prepare to go to this person. You just need to go privately, avoiding all gossip and the possibility of public shame, which could have the opposite effect of what is desired. If a person's sin becomes widely known through gossip, the resulting shame usually drives the person away from the healing community of the church. There is great power in this first step of going to a person privately. Remember how Nathan confronted King David privately about his sins of murder and adultery. David had been blind to his sin prior to Nathan's rebuke. What good came both to David and the entire nation as a result of Nathan's courageous and loving confrontation!

Fifth, evidence is required in order for a person to be convicted and for more formal church discipline to commence. The second visit is to include two or three people out of a concern for adequate evidence. In the Bible, as well as in the courts of our civil government, eye-witness testimony is considered adequate proof of an offense or crime. The rights of the accused are in view with this requirement.

Sixth, the goal of this discipline is described by the word “listen.” Church discipline terminates whenever someone listens. Why didn’t Jesus use the word “repent” here? When he uses the word “listen,” he is helping us understand how life-giving repentance happens. It happens as we listen. Listening, like repentance, requires the kind of humility that says, “I might be wrong.” Listening also must go beyond mere comprehension to action. When has the patient “listened” to her doctor, who has been telling her that she needs to lose weight in order to avoid health problems? Has she listened when she can repeat the doctor’s speech or when she actually undertakes the long process of losing weight? Repentant listening requires taking appropriate action. There is almost always a clear and obvious fruit of repentance that will be evident when someone has listened and humbled himself.

Seventh, where repentance doesn’t occur, the outcome of this is to treat someone as a Gentile and a tax collector. That is Jesus’ way of saying that they are to be treated as any other unbeliever. They are regarded as outside the people of God.

Finally, prayer is central to this whole endeavor, and Jesus ends with some wonderful promises concerning prayer. **“If two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.”** It is important to keep in mind the context of this promise, applying to this process of discipline. It doesn’t mean that if you can find a friend who will agree with you to pray that you might win the lottery, that you will in fact win the lottery. It means that the small group engaged in going after a wandering sinner have promises from God in the area of prayer. These are the two or three who were witnesses in the earlier step of discipline. In the Old Testament, the witnesses were to be the first ones to cast the stones. Here, they are to be the first ones to pray. When they ask God for wisdom to know how to approach one of these wandering ones, God will give it. When they ask for courage to be able to do so, God will grant it.

Verse 20 sweetens it even more by promising that Jesus will be in your midst. Husbands and wives, if you want to bring Jesus into your marriage, may I suggest you do what Jesus says here and pray together. Pray for your children that they might not wander. Or if they have wandered, pray for God’s grace to bring them home.

CONCLUSION:

Jesus is in the midst of this process because he came to seek and to save the lost. He came to a fallen human race that we might be brought back. He gave of himself completely to bring us home. Let us follow him in giving of ourselves for those who are wandering.