

Because of nursery rhymes and quaint pictures hung on our walls we, as 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans, think we know about sheep and shepherds. We have recited Psalm 23, mostly at funerals, and know what a shepherd's hook looks like, although never having held one ourselves. But most of us don't have even the beginning of understanding of what it's like to be so dedicated to taking care of livestock that we would instantly, sacrificially and urgently place our lives on the line to rescue one wayward ewe. We have little imagination for that; thankfully, Scriptures color that picture for us in brilliant hues within the lines of one figure—Jesus Christ. Let's look together at His description of Himself as a shepherd.

Luke 15: *The Parable of the Lost Sheep* NKJV

- 1 Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to hear Him.
- 2 And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, "This Man receives sinners and eats with them."
- 3 So He spoke this parable to them, saying:
- 4 "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness, and go after the one which is lost until he finds it?
- 5 And when he has found *it*, he lays *it* on his shoulders, rejoicing.
- 6 And when he comes home, he calls together *his* friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost!'
- 7 I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine just persons who need no repentance.

With calloused feet, bronze skin and strong arms the shepherds of Palestine in Christ's day were nothing of note to look upon. These men were about as rugged and rough-cut as the cragged hills they toiled on day and night as sheep herders. They took their jobs seriously even if society had no place for them at their fine banquet tables. It would be hard to match the thankless loyalty of their profession with that of just about any other worker in town.

They may not have had much in the way of higher learning or social refinement, but what they lacked in suave they more than made up for with their keen ability to tend to some of the most aimless, un-intuitive, helpless, vulnerable animals on the planet—sheep. Unless you had been brought up as a herdsman, it would be doubtful that you could withstand the forces of nature exacted against your body or the tedious demands of nurturing animals in a terrain crowded with lurking predators.

With their ostentatious robes and flaunting mannerisms the Pharisees were worlds apart in society's structure from filthy unrefined shepherds. But those weren't the only ones in society that they were polarized from.

Fishermen, crooked tax-collectors, adulteresses, lepers, poor, lame, etc...these were the people not only *un*welcomed at the table of the Pharisees, but also utterly rejected as human beings. Those who did not keep the petty laws of the Pharisees were crudely referred to as "the People of the Land." Every effort was made by the Pharisee to not only avoid dealings with law-transgressors, but also to even have contact with them.

When Christ emerged from his father's woodshop and began to walk among "the People of the Land" He gained a reputation among the Pharisees as one who was a "friend of sinners." Being among those who were law-breakers was tantamount to being one of them. But Jesus made no excuse for His contact with these wayward ones. As He looked out upon the crowds He saw them as sheep needing a shepherd, and desperately needing to be rescued from their fallen state.

In a religious society built on legalism this was an affront. It was repulsive to think that one who demonstrated such mastery of the Law of God would dwell among sinners. Legalism had a strangle-hold on these people. Even the wayward of society had come to believe there may be no hope for them. After all, the law only makes further demands and offers no reconciliation. Any who had transgressed these countless laws were hopeless cases. They were like sheep that had become prey, or that had wandered dangerously away from safety, and succumbed to injury and peril.

**Jesus Christ identifies with the sheep.** Rather than joining the ranks of the condemning Pharisees, even as the Holy God, Christ illustrated His involvement in the lives of the sheep as the Shepherd Himself. In a remarkable and counter-intuitive declaration Jesus Christ affirms that He is in the business of tending to the law-breakers and wayward souls. Rather than taking the side of the self-righteous Pharisees and agreeing with them about the massive amount of transgressions of the people before Him, Jesus described Himself as the one who had come for the exact purpose of involving Himself in the shepherding business of wayward people and initiating the process of restoration and healing. Not only does He highlight His *\*identification* with the sheep as the shepherd, His *\*involvement* and *\*initiation* of help, but He also prophesies of His *\*intention* to bring joy to Himself and all of Heaven upon the successful completion of His mission.

Christ began teaching this parable by asking a very defining question that was meant to contrast His Savior-like character with that of the schemes of salvation offered by the Anti-Savior-like Pharisees. “What man of you...” (v. 4)

His question begs an answer. There wasn't a man among them that would ever act like that kind of shepherd. These men were wrapped more tightly in their self-righteous condemnation of sinners than their gold-plated rings were gripping their stubby fingers. Not one of them could even imagine setting aside their ostentatious robes to scramble down a cliff to the aid of a dirty, wounded sheep. Not one of them would dare come into arms length with someone they deemed unclean even if to help them!

**The contrast between man's scheming righteousness and the grace-filled plan of God for redemption is starkly highlighted by this unlikely comparison.** We should be careful to note that the contrast between Christ and a mere human shepherd is infinitely disproportional in its likelihood. But this is our God! This is our Savior! As pristine and pure as Jesus Christ was in the presence of perfect communion with the Father in Heaven, it did not prevent Him from “scrambling” down the rugged terrain of this fallen world to rescue helpless and hopeless filthy people like you and I.

**We are more like sheep than we would like to think. We are in more need of a shepherd than we would care to admit. But Jesus is more like a Shepherd than we can possibly imagine.** When Jesus accomplishes His purpose in seeking us out, rescuing us from our sinful condition and presenting us before all of Heaven He is like that faithful Shepherd.

**Life Application Questions:**

1. Christ's question, “What man of you...” leads us to a question we ought to consider. What or who are you trusting in for the salvation of your soul? What will you do with your sin?
2. How does legalism strangle a proper view of forgiving grace?
3. Why does the law compound our guilt?
4. Are you a sheep?
5. How is Christ a Shepherd?
6. Describe the “lostness” of your soul without Christ's rescuing help.

7. List the “I's” of Christ's part of this story.  
(find \*'s)

- I \_\_\_\_\_
- I \_\_\_\_\_
- I \_\_\_\_\_
- I \_\_\_\_\_

8. How does this parable exalt the character of Jesus Christ in contrast to the character of the most upright religious men of His time?
9. Is Jesus Christ your shepherd? If not, today look upon Him in faith and repentance confessing your sinfulness to Him trusting in His forgiveness available to restore you to a right relationship with God today.

