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Sermon Notes

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The Good Shepherd Protects His Flock

Matthew 18:12-14

The greatest issue of our lives is this: will I go to heaven when I die, or will I be eternally lost?

As we go on in the Christian life, this question deepens... “Lord, I see so much evil in this world, and even worse, I see so much evil still in my own soul... how can I know that I will not turn away, fall away from Christ in the end and be lost?”

Where is my security? How can I have any sense of safety in this dangerous world?

I had a striking experience some years ago... I went to visit a woman who was dying of cancer... very seriously ill... I came to minister to her, and to speak to her of her soul; she was extremely anxious about death, afraid of dying

I gave her some basic milk-like verses from John’s gospel:

John 5:24 "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life.

But after I left, she spoke to a Christian nurse standing there: “I never really understood the Bible.” The nurse told me that when I next visited.

Later that night, she fell into a coma from which she never recovered.

As I came to visit her the next day, I was horrified to see her thrashing around in her bed in some kind of agony... I asked the nurse who was there and she said she was in mental agony, not physical, since she was so heavily medicated.

I wondered about the state of her soul... and I wondered about myself... how do I know that I won’t die like that, or worse? Stripped of all assurance, lost, having no faith in Christ

Matthew 18:12-14 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 to look for the one that wandered off? ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.

Today's text teaches us where to look for our security... to the activity of Christ as our Good Shepherd

I. Christ the Good Shepherd

A. Context

1. Apostles bickering about who is the greatest
2. Christ seeks to humble them, and to train them
 - a. He calls a little child and has him stand in their midst
 - b. He presents the child as the paradigm example of the humble trusting faith-filled state that every true Christian must have
 - c. He then uses the humility of the child to speak to the apostles about their visions of greatness
 - d. The Kingdom of Heaven is made up of child-like ones
 - e. Whoever is humble like that will be the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven; and whoever welcomes a little child is welcoming Christ
 - f. But if anyone causes one of those little ones to sin, it would be better for that person to have a large millstone hung around his neck and be drowned in the depths of the sea
3. warning against sin:
4. ultimate assurance in the dreadful battle against sin: Christ, the Good Shepherd who will make certain that every one of his sheep makes it safely to heaven

B. Old Testament Picture of God as Good Shepherd

1. Jacob the first to use this analogy

Genesis 48:15 Then [Jacob] blessed Joseph and said, "May the God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day bless these boys..."

2. most famous: Psalm 23

Psalm 23:1-3 *he LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. ² He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, ³ he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*

3. another reference in Psalms:

Psalm 95:6-7 *Come, let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the LORD our Maker; ⁷ for he is our God and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care.*

4. most appealing: Isaiah 40

Isaiah 40:11 *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.*

5. most extended treatment: Ezekiel 34

Ezekiel 34:11-16 *"For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. ¹² As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. ¹³ I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. ¹⁴ I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵ I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. ¹⁶ I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.*

Listen to all the things Israel's Good Shepherd says He will do for His people:

- I will search for them.
- I will look after them.
- I will rescue them.
- I will gather them.
- I will bring them into their own land.
- I will pasture them and tend them.
- I will search for the lost and bring back the strays.
- I will bind up the injured.
- I will strengthen the weak.
- I will destroy the sleek and the strong. (Self-reliant vs. God reliant)
- I will shepherd with justice.
- I will judge.
- I will make a covenant of peace.
- I will bless them.

- I will provide for them.

6. the greatest image of the people of God as the wandering sheep is in Isaiah 53

Isaiah 53:6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

This is a clear prediction of the Substitutionary death of Christ for us...

7. this prefigures the coming of Christ... as does Micah 5

Micah 5:2-4 But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times...⁴ He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth.

C. Christ's Claim in John 10

John 10:1-4 I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber.² The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep.³ The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.⁴ When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.

John 10:11-15 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.¹² The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it.¹³ The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.¹⁴ "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me--¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father-- and I lay down my life for the sheep.

D. Christ the Good Shepherd Here

Matthew 18:12 "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 to look for the one that wandered off?

1. He is promising that He will protect EVERY SINGLE ONE of His flock...
2. He is not playing a numbers game in which a 99% score is good
3. if a single sheep should wander off, He will do everything in His power to bring that single sheep back safely home

4. Christ uses a powerful image here... one that His hearers would have been well familiar with
 - a. Shepherds abounded in Palestine
 - b. So also did dangerous terrain, with rocky crags and precipitous cliffs and ravines
 - c. Sheep were constantly wandering off
5. Christ is speaking here of the value and worth of every single sheep in His flock... even the littlest ones that these mighty apostles might have despised... might have looked down upon
6. Christ values them highly

II. The Danger of the Flock

Perhaps sheep might bring a question to Darwin's theory of natural selection... "survival of the fittest"... they have everything against them: they are weak, dumb, slow and delicious! Seemingly designed to be eaten by wild beasts

They are in constant danger... and so are we

A. External Danger

1. Satan

1 Peter 5:8 Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.

The devil seeks to devour the sheep

Ephesians 6:11-12 Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. ¹² For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

Martin Luther:

For still our ancient foe
doth seek to work us woe;
his craft and power are great,
and armed with cruel hate,
on earth is not his equal.
Did we in our own strength confide,
our striving would be losing,

Satan is called the “god of this world”... he lays traps for us, attacks our very souls, and harasses lost people constantly by his demons:

Matthew 9:36 *When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.*

2. the world

- a. enticing and alluring us with soul-killing lusts
- b. yearning for power, pleasure, possessions
- c. Vanity Fair

Constantly selling idols to entice us from true affection to Christ

So also the world can be violent, persecuting Christians to intimidate them from following Christ

We are constantly surrounded by spiritual danger

B. Internal Danger

Christ mentions the one sheep “wandering off”

This sheep are prone to do... following their own appetites from one patch of grass to the next until they have lost their way

As the hymnwriter put it, “Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love”

Romans 7:18-20 *I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. ¹⁹ For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do-- this I keep on doing. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.*

- 1. perhaps we begin to drift spiritually

Hebrews 2:1 *We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away.*

- 2. it can happen gradually... or even suddenly

- a. some new habits creep in... what we watch on TV or DVD; what websites we visit
- b. soon we are enslaved to sin: materialism, sexual temptation, pleasure-seeking, etc.

3. desire for God diminishes: we have officially wandered away from Christ
 - a. any Christian duty is an oppressive burden
 - b. we maintain the outward forms of the Christian life only for the sake of show, for our pride's sake
 - c. soon, we don't even do that at all

Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* listed these gradual steps to apostasy

1. They stop thinking about God, death, and judgment to come.
2. Little by little, they throw off private duties, as private prayer, curbing their lusts, watching, sorrow for sin, and the like.
3. Then they avoid the company of lively and warm Christians.
4. After that they grow cold to public duty, as listening to sermons, reading, Christian fellowship, and the like.
5. Then they begin to pick holes in the coats of some of the godly... to find faults with the believers
6. Then they begin to adhere to, and associate themselves with, fleshly, loose, and openly sinful men.
7. Then they give way to sinful habits in secret; and they are glad if they can see such sinful habits in any that are counted honest, that they may the more boldly do it through their example.
8. After this they begin to play with little sins openly.
9. And then, being hardened, they show themselves as they truly are. Thus, being launched again into the gulf of misery, unless a miracle of grace prevent it, they everlastingly perish in their own self-deceit.

This actually does happen to hypocrites... those who only claimed to be Christians

1 John 2:19 They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.

C. Without Christ's Vigilance We Would Be Lost

1. the power of these dangers is overwhelming
2. were it not for the constant protection and sustaining grace of our Good Shepherd we would be lost eternally

3. for the true believer, Christ will always come to the rescue

III. The Eternal Security of the Believer

A. Note the Actions of the Good Shepherd

1. he leaves the ninety-nine on the hills
2. he diligently searches until he finds it
3. Christ taught this in the cycle of parables in Luke 15: the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the “Prodigal Son”
4. in all three cases the one who has lost something valuable keeps looking until he or she finds it
5. Christ will continue to “seek and save” us until we are no longer in danger

B. Note the Joy of the Good Shepherd

Vs. 13 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.

1. Greek implies some question as to whether or not the shepherd’s search will be successful
 - a. In real life, many wandering sheep are never found at all
 - b. This danger makes the joy all the deeper if he should happen to find the sheep
 - c. Now in a moment, I will say that all the elect of God can never be finally lost... God will sovereignly see to it that they are recovered
 - d. However, that truth in no way diminishes the joy God feels when we repent of our sinful straying and return to Christ
2. more joy over the one that sheep than the others who remained secure
3. this does not mean that He loves them more... but just that He had a joy-filled response to the safe return of the wandering sheep
4. illustrations

illus. a mother with a seriously sick child, the child is burning up with fever... the mother will stay up all night, give the child baths, tend the child’s every need, even to the neglect of her other children... and when that child recovers and his temperature returns to 98.6, she is far more relieved and joyful over that child’s health than over

Illus. at 8 p.m. central daylight time on October 17, 1987, a national drama came to a joyful conclusion when 18-month old Jessica McClure was safely rescued from an abandoned water well after 58 1/2 hours. She had tumbled into the water shaft and had gotten wedged in the shaft 22 feet down. The drama, in which hundreds of workers from the surrounding oil fields worked day and night to rescue the child, Jessica McClure, peaked in the final, emotional hour as workers reached her and gingerly hoisted her to the surface amid wild applause of onlookers and quiet tears of the burly workers. The effort had captivated the nation, and hundreds of thousands of people responded with tears and shouts of joy at her safe rescue... their joy at her safe rescue in no way implied she was more valuable than any other baby in America... but it is the reasonable emotional reaction to her great danger and her rescue

So it is when Christ successfully rescues one of His wandering sheep from sin and brings that person safely back to the fold

C. Note the Decree of God the Father

Matthew 18:14 In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.

1. very strong statement
2. Christ points here to the will of God the Father... this is His will of decree

ESV Matthew 18:14 So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

3. the human shepherd may fail in his attempt to rescue the wandering sheep
4. the emergency rescue team might have failed in their attempt to rescue baby Jessica from the well shaft
5. God the Father will NOT fail in rescuing one of His little ones
6. he is NOT willing that any of these elect ones should perish
7. this is the doctrine of the eternal security of the believer... and it rests on God's sovereign decree... His will expressed before the foundation of the world

“once saved, always saved”

more actively... your Good Shepherd will come get you and bring you home if you wander

D. Attacks on this Doctrine

1. arminians, who strongly emphasize the human side of salvation, strongly oppose this doctrine

2. they believe it gives people a license to sin
3. John Wesley, father of the Methodist movement, cited many passages which warn about falling away to prove this point... he summed up his article with this bone-chilling assertion:

The sum of all is this: If the Scriptures are true, those who are holy or righteous in the judgment of God himself; those who are endued with the faith that purifies the heart, that produces a good conscience; those who are grafted into the good olive-tree, the spiritual, invisible Church; those who are branches of the true vine, of whom Christ says, "***I am the vine, ye are branches;***" those who so effectually know Christ as by that knowledge to have escaped the pollutions of the world; those who see the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, and who have been made partakers of the Holy Ghost, of the witness and of the fruits of the Spirit; those who live by faith in the Son of God; those who are sanctified by the blood of the covenant, may nevertheless so fall from God as to perish everlastingly.

Therefore let him that standeth take heed lest he fall.

However, many other passages testify to the eternal security of God's elect:

E. Many Testimonies to this Truth

Romans 8:28-30 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

John 6:38-40 For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. ³⁹ And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."

John 10:27-30 My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. ³⁰ I and the Father are one."

1 Peter 1:5 shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

Ephesians 1:13-14 And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is a deposit guaranteeing our

inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession-- to the praise of his glory.

Jude 1:24-25 To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy-- ²⁵ to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.

F. How God Guarantees our Final Salvation

How then does God guarantee the final salvation of the elect?

1. by actively filtering the temptations they face, putting a hedge of protection around them that Satan has to ask to penetrate
2. by strengthening them to face those temptations... giving them promises and warnings in Scripture suitable to the test
3. by convicting them by the indwelling Spirit if they should stumble into sin
4. by putting them into healthy churches with godly undershepherds who help pursue them should they wander

G. The Role of the Church

1. next two passages: church discipline, and the parable of forgiveness
 - a. Matthew 18:15-20 talks about church discipline... one of the great ways that God deals with sinning church members... and a tremendous test of true faith; all Christians sin, but true Christians repent readily when confronted with their sin... in this way Christ himself is dealing with His church

Matthew 18:20 For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."

- b. Matthew 18:21-35: the parable of the ten thousand talents... a strong message of forgiveness for the repentant sinner
2. the context is on the restoration of sinning church members
3. the Good Shepherd goes out to get the wandering sheep by means of other undershepherds and other Christians

IV. Our Responsibilities

A. Trust in Christ Alone

1. your own faith and courage and purity and love for God are insufficient to get you through the rest of your time on earth
2. your security is in the activity of your Good Shepherd, who will lead you in paths of righteousness for His name's sake
3. be aware of the great power at work in you and around you, protecting you from falling away
4. put your trust solely on Christ—His blood shed on the cross, His intercessions for you at the right hand of God

B. Rest Securely in Christ... but don't use it for sin

1. the doctrine of the eternal security of the believer is not meant to be traded for sin
2. there are ample warnings against the deadly effects of sin
3. you don't know for sure if you are one of the elect other than a general principle of personal holiness in your life

Romans 8:13-14 if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, ¹⁴ because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

4. so do not use the doctrine of "once saved, always saved" as an excuse for sin

C. Guard Your Heart

Proverbs 4:23 Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life.

1. watch yourselves carefully... guard what you love, what you follow, what you do
2. be careful over the habit patterns of your life
3. do not put the Lord to the test based on the doctrine of the eternal security of the believer

D. Repent Quickly

1. If you're starting to drift, study the gospel again more carefully

Hebrews 2:1 We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away.

2. become accountable to the church more than ever before

E. Watch Over One Another with Brotherly Love

1. the process of church discipline we will discuss next time is vital to the health of the church
 2. optimistically, it should be seen as the way that Christ actively seeks wandering people and brings them back to spiritual health
 3. we need to care whether or not a brother or sister is wandering or drifting into sin
- F. Always Be Ready to Forgive and Restore
1. God rejoices over the wandering believer who turns back again and repents
 2. so we also should be ready to forgive and restore someone who repents and asks forgiveness