

The Ninety and Nine

Luke 15:3-7; Acts 20:28; Psalm 23

*There were ninety and nine that safely lay/In the shelter of the fold,
But one was out on the hills away/Far-off from the gates of gold.
Away on the mountains wild and bare
Away from the tender Shepherd's care,
Away from the tender Shepherd's care.*

*"Lord, Thou hast here Thy ninety and nine:/ Are they not enough for Thee?"
But the Shepherd made answer: "This of Mine/Has wandered away from Me;
And although the road be rough and steep
I go to the desert to find My sheep,
I go to the desert to find My sheep."*

*But none of the ransomed ever knew/How deep were the waters crossed;
Nor how dark was the night the Lord passed through/Ere He found His sheep that was lost.
Out in the desert He heard its cry,
Sick and helpless and ready to die;
Sick and helpless and ready to die.*

*And all through the mountains, thunder-riven/And up from the rocky steep,
There arose a glad cry to the gate of Heaven,/"Rejoice! I have found My sheep!"
And the angels echoed around the throne,
"Rejoice, for the Lord brings back His own!
Rejoice, for the Lord brings back His own!"*

Those are the words of a hymn by Elizabeth Clephane, who also wrote "*Beneath the Cross of Jesus*." It's a beautiful hymn, based on the story Jesus told of the shepherd who had one-hundred sheep, but one day discovered that one of them was missing. In the story told by the Master, the shepherd left the ninety-nine sheep in the open and went looking for the one lost sheep.

Yet to fully understand what Jesus was trying to say to us, we need to look at why He told this story in the first place. Let's put ourselves in the sandals of those who heard the story for the first time.

Luke 15 begins by telling us that the tax collectors and other people shunned by the rest of society were gathering together to hear Jesus speak. The religious people—

the Pharisees and the teachers of the Law—were unhappy about that. So they began to mutter and murmur among themselves. They were looking for something wrong with the things Jesus did, and here was their opportunity! They said, “This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.”

So when Jesus began to tell the parable of the lost sheep in verse three of that chapter, it was in response to the criticism which was being leveled at Him by the Pharisees and teachers of the Law. In fact, just to make certain that they understood the point He was trying to make, Jesus told not just one, but three, parables, all related, in order to demonstrate the purpose of His mission on the earth as the Son of God.

First, Jesus told the parable of the Lost Sheep, in vv. 3-7. In verse 8-10, Jesus told the parable of the Lost Coin, and in vv. 11-32, He told the parable of the Lost Son, what we commonly call “The Parable of the Prodigal Son.”

But in telling those three parables, Jesus was saying that His mission to the earth in seeking the lost sheep, the lost coins and the lost sons of humanity was **a mission to be shared by all who follow Him.** This truth is emphasized in a negative way in vv. 25-32, where the elder son refused to participate in the celebration of his brother’s return. Deftly, expertly, Jesus put His finger on the very heart of the church’s responsibility in sharing that mission when He said in verse 32, *“But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again: he was lost and is found.”*

Years later, one of the followers of Jesus, named Paul, found himself in the city of Ephesus, the religious center of western Asia. But the citizens of Ephesus did not worship the Lord God—they worshipped Diana, otherwise known as Artemis, the goddess of fertility. The temple which had been constructed there in her honor has been acclaimed as one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Paul stayed in Ephesus approximately three years before the opposition to his preaching rose to such heights that a riot broke out.

After the uproar had ceased, as we read in Acts 20, Paul saw that it was time for him to move on. He wasn’t running from the fight, but he did have sense enough to know when his ministry and effectiveness was finished in a particular area.

Paul gathered together the elders of the Ephesian church, and told them farewell. As we hear his final message to them, we can almost imagine Jesus standing there behind Paul, telling him what to say, because Paul's words remind us a great deal of the Parable of the Lost Sheep, way back in Luke 15. Paul compared their church to a flock of sheep, and he charged the elders of that church with a grave responsibility. It is a responsibility given to every church which has ever been in existence. If they were faithful to fulfill that responsibility, they would be sharing in the mission Jesus had, which He passed on to those who would follow Him—us included.

Paul told them exactly what the rest of Scripture teaches—that the church of Ephesus was part of the flock of God. We're part of that flock, too—**so if we are the flock of God, what should we be doing?** What are our responsibilities? In an actual sheepfold this would not be true, but in the Lord's sheepfold, both the sheep *and* the shepherd have responsibilities. Let's look at them.

1 **The first responsibility is that we should watch after ourselves, v. 28a**

Paul told the elders of the Ephesian church, in the first part of verse 28, "*Keep watch over yourselves.*" In fact, it was such an important command, that Paul repeated the concept before he was through. In verse 31, he said, "*Be on your guard.*"

You and I would do well to pay attention to what Paul told the elders at Ephesus many, many years ago. It is a truth the Scriptures repeat in various ways a number of times. For example, Paul instructed Timothy; "*Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth* (2 Timothy 2:15). The only way Timothy could present himself as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, and the only way you and I can do that, is to watch over ourselves with sharp eyes.

The writer of Hebrews believed this truth. He said, "*We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away*" (Hebrews 2:1). He was saying that we need to keep watch over ourselves. But he was just stating a truth Jesus had already given His disciples. Jesus told them,

“Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak” (Matthew 26:41).

How does this apply to the flock of God? How does an actual flock of sheep watch out for themselves? Ron Parker is a modern-day shepherd here in America, who has written a book entitled *The Sheep Book: A Handbook for the Modern Shepherd*. He writes, “Given fencing to protect their wandering away, and protection from predators, **sheep will take care of themselves** provided enough grazing, browsing and water are available” [emphasis added].

Keeping watch over ourselves is the first thing you and I must do as the flock of God. We cannot do much else, unless we keep a keen eye on our own spiritual growth. It is so easy to look out for others, isn't it, especially if we think they are doing something wrong! We like to catch them **then!** Yet you and I can go no further towards fulfilling our own responsibility as the flock of God unless and until we are careful to watch over ourselves!

It is something we must do all our lives, because you and I will always be susceptible to spiritual danger, as long as we have breath in our bodies. Even as we, like sheep, are feasting on the green pastures to which God leads us, we must keep our eyes up, watching constantly for any threat to our spiritual well-being.

2 **The second responsibility is that we must watch after others,** **v. 28b**

This second responsibility is built squarely on the first. Paul told the Ephesian elders, *“Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.”*

There is one spiritual danger which has crept into our midst so stealthily that perhaps we have not been aware of it. That is the danger of spending all our time and energy in watching out for ourselves that we have nothing left to give to the task of overseeing the spiritual development of others. We like to come, perhaps, to Sunday School and Worship, perhaps to some of the other activities. We like to be fed from God's Word. That is the way it should be. We look around us and think that we sure wish Old-So-And-So was here. But many times we don't assume personal responsibility for the spiritual welfare of Old-So-And-So.

One book on raising sheep included a major section concerning the nutritional requirements of sheep. The author wrote, “Sheep and lambs require water, a source of energy, a source of protein, and small amounts of vitamins and minerals.” He also said, “A sheep that does not receive sufficient energy will lose body weight and fat, stop growing, produce less wool and milk, and will be more susceptible to disease than an adequately nourished sheep.” In a similar way, that is what happens to people when they are not fed spiritually! It is our responsibility to make sure that all those who feed at our table here at our church are fed a proper spiritual diet.

The shepherd has to watch out for many things which could threaten his sheep. There is always the possibility of a break in the fence, and a fence that can let sheep out can just as easily let dogs and other animals in. The shepherd has to regularly inspect the fences to make sure his sheep are protected.

The shepherd has to watch for internal and external parasites, such as worms and lice. He must protect his sheep from flies which lay their eggs at the openings of the nasal passages. He must guard against predators. He must inspect his sheep on a regular basis for eye infections, foot rot, and bloat. The point is that the shepherd has the responsibility to watch over his flock.

One book on raising sheep includes a section on “How To Detect A Sick Sheep.” “You have to be familiar with the normal behavior of your sheep, even for each particular animal, to know when one is acting abnormally....Signs of abnormality are loss of appetite, **or not coming to eat as usual**. Be concerned if a sheep is lying down most of the time, when the others are not.”

Do you how this applies? The flock of God very often has sick sheep, and you and I have a responsibility to be able to recognize when someone is sick in a spiritual sense. **Just as with actual sheep, when someone senses a spiritual “loss of appetite” and does not come to feast from God’s table with the other sheep in the flock, there is something wrong!**

We have the responsibility to watch over the sheep in the fold. It is no small accident that the New Testament teaches us how to get along with each other. Let me give you a few examples: “*Honor one another above yourselves*” (Romans

12:10). “...have equal concern for each other” (1 Corinthians 12:25).

“...encourage one another and build each other up” (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

“Carry each other’s burdens and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). And there are many, many others. In the parable of the Lost Sheep in Luke 15, the shepherd was careful to oversee the safety and welfare of his sheep. You and I must do the same.

3 The third responsibility is that we must watch over the entire church, v. 28c

Paul told the Ephesians here at the end of verse 28 “*Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.*” We should look after the spiritual welfare and development of the entire church. The pastor and deacons should lead the way in this, but every one of us who is a part of the flock of God has this responsibility. None is exempt.

What Jesus does for us, we in turn are to do for others. For example, Jesus **loves** us, and He tells us to that we are to love each other in the exact same way He loves us. Jesus **forgives** us, and we are to forgive others in the exact same way He forgives us. Jesus **gives us eternal life**, and we are to make others aware that they can have eternal life as well.

Psalm 23 is a beautiful example of this idea. If you were asked to name only one of the 150 psalms which has meant the most to you, you would probably name the 23rd Psalm. It speaks of the loving, caring, intimate relationship with the Lord which is available to us. But that’s only half the truth of that Psalm.

The other half, the unexperienced half, is that this is a relationship the entire church, as the flock of God, can share with the Lord, who is the Shepherd. When I in faith declare that the Lord is my Shepherd, I am also acknowledging that there are other sheep in the flock, who have the same relationship to the Lord as I do. The Shepherd loves and cares for them just as He does me.

When I in faith declare that He makes me lie down in green pastures, and that He leads me beside the quiet waters, and that He restores my soul, I must acknowledge that the Shepherd does not do that for me alone. He does it for every other sheep in the flock! His rod and staff do not comfort only me, but every other sheep in the

flock as well. The table is not spread before me in the presence of my enemies only for my benefit, but for the benefit of the entire flock.

Philip Keller wrote the book *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*. At one time, Mr. Keller worked as a shepherd, and he shares many valuable insights on the flock of God. He writes, “In every animal society there is established an order of dominance or status within the group. In a penful of chickens it is referred to as ‘the pecking order.’ With cattle it is called ‘the horning order.’ Among sheep we speak of ‘the butting order.’”

Keller describes the friction that takes place in a flock when an “arrogant, cunning and domineering old ewe” seeks to maintain her position in the flock. If she spies other ewes or lambs getting too close to her favorite grazing area, she will butt them and drive them away. The rams, too, are constantly battling each other, defending their rights and their possession of the ewes. Keller writes, “Because of this rivalry, tension and competition for status and self-assertion, there is friction in a flock. The sheep cannot lie down and rest in contentment. . . . This continuous conflict and jealousy within the flock can be a most detrimental thing. The sheep become edgy, tense, discontented and restless. They lose weight and become irritable.

“But one point that always interested me very much,” continues Keller, “was that whenever I came into view and my presence attracted their attention, the sheep quickly forgot their foolish rivalries and stopped their fighting. The shepherd’s presence made all the difference in their behavior.”

But now listen to his exact words as he wraps up his point: “In any business firm, any office, any family, any community, any church, any human organization or group, be it large or small, the struggle for self-assertion and self-recognition goes on. Most of us fight to be ‘top sheep.’ We butt and quarrel and compete to ‘get ahead.’ And in the process people are hurt.

“In our human relationships when we become acutely aware of being in the presence of Christ, our foolish, selfish snobbery and rivalry will end. . . . When my eyes are on my Master they are not on those around me.”

Powerful words, aren't they? They emphasize the huge responsibility you and I have to oversee the spiritual development of the entire church. Our church will be nothing more or less than you and I are. **We make our church what it is.** Every one of us, from the youngest to the oldest, from the newest to the most established, carries the burden of seeing that our fellowship as a church grows. Every one of us has this responsibility of overseeing the spiritual development of the entire church.

As a sheep in the flock, isn't it about time that you realize your responsibility as a part of the Flock of God? First of all, you have a responsibility to look after your own spiritual needs. That must come first, before you can do anything else. Then you must watch over others, especially those who are newer in the faith than you are. And then all of us must watch over the entire church. **This church will be exactly what you and I, working together, decide to make it.**

Will you commit yourself to working with the Shepherd to make sure that all the sheep are in the fold? Will you refuse to be satisfied with having the ninety and nine safe in the fold, as long as there is one lost sheep out there somewhere?