

"DOES GOD CARE?"

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PARK AVENUE METHODIST CHURCH

## DOES GOD CARE?

The first message sent by Samuel Morse over his new telegraph line from Washington to Baltimore in 1844 contained these familiar words: "WHAT HATH GOD WROUGHT?". In November, 1951, these same words were repeated as the first message on a new form of communication. The message was sent from Cedar Rapids, Iowa, to Sterling, Virginia, by way of the moon. It marked the first successful experiment with the sending of ultra high frequency waves over long distance. These waves do not normally travel beyond the horizon when sent the usual way. IN ORDER TO TRAVEL beyond the horizon they have to be reflected from some object high in the air. Therefore, the sending station at Cedar Rapids aimed its transmitter at the moon. The receiving set at Sterling, Virginia was also pointed to the moon. The message went up to the moon and back, a distance of 450,000 miles, in two and a half seconds.

"WHAT HATH GOD WROUGHT?" The greatness of the universe expands our ideas of the greatness of God. The creative powers of men to explore the mysteries of the universe have brought us a new sense of wonder at the creative powers of God. BUT, BY THE SAME TOKEN, we are increasingly led to question the concern of God for men. Our universe is so large, and we are so small. There are so many of us. Occasionally I find myself asking the question - IS THE GOD OF THE ULTRA HIGH FREQUENCY WAVE INTERESTED IN US? It's a question that we often hurl toward the skies. And is the answer we receive, only an echo of our own voice reflected from the moon?

Jesus did not think so! He came to show men that God is a God of love - tender, warm, and personal.

What is God like?

What does he think of us?

Does God really care?

Jesus answered these ancient questions by telling the parable of the lost sheep which was read for our scripture lesson this morning.

God is like a shepherd. We know that the shepherd was an important

person in the time of Jesus. We know that the shepherd loved his sheep. If one strayed away, he went directly in search of it. He kept looking until he found it. Then he gathered it up in his arms and carried it back with great rejoicing. God is like a shepherd!

This was a new and startling idea of what God was like. It brought hope to the discouraged. The parable of the lost sheep is rich in meaning. There are three ideas which grow out of it which I would like to share with you this morning.

GOD IS INTERESTED  
IN HUMAN BEINGS.

First, God is interested in human beings. This parable stresses the love of God for the individual.

The shepherd KNOWS his sheep. Each one is very important to him. When one wanders off, off he goes in search of it. He still has ninety and nine. But it is the LOST ONE that is the center of his concern. Well, God is like that, says Jesus, in his concern for human beings. All men belong to God. But his chief interest is not in men in the group. God is concerned with the individual person. He needs us. He wants us....every one of us! God loves even the least of us.

A committee of prominent Chicago citizens waited in one of the city's railway stations. They were there to welcome one of the greatest men in the world. He arrived and greeted them in three languages. He was a giant of a man, six feet four inches tall with bushy hair and a walrus mustache. The reception committee stood around telling him how honored they were to meet him, and how all of the important people of the city were waiting to entertain him. Reporters took down his every word. Flash cameras were busy taking his picture. SUDDENLY he asked to be excused. HE WALKED RAPIDLY through the crowd on the station platform. Coming to an old woman who was struggling with heavy suitcases, he lifted up her bags with his great arms. Then he told her to follow him. He worked his way through the crowd and took the woman to her coach. After wishing her a good journey, he returned to the committee. "SORRY TO KEEP YOU WAITING GENTLEMEN", he said to the astonished group.

The distinguished visitor was Dr. Albert Schweitzer, famous philosopher, musician, doctor, and missionary. "FIRST TIME I EVER SAW A SERMON WALKING", said one reporter. A member of the reception committee remarked: "A LOT OF US STUFFED SHIRTS WERE UNSTUFFED THAT MOMENT!" A man with a world mission, engaged in writing a profound history of civilization was demonstrating, in a simple way, the love of God for the least individual.

That's the meaning behind this parable. Jesus is telling us that God is interested in the nameless, the forsaken, the lonely, AS INDIVIDUALS. Each person is so very important in God's love and plan.

It's hard to comprehend. We often wonder if God really does care? Does he take note of a lost sheep, a fallen sparrow, or the hairs on our head? Max Factor, Jr. of Hollywood, once employed a girl to count the hairs on the human head. The total was 135,168. Are these all numbered by God. HOW CAN WE KNOW THAT GOD IS INTERESTED IN US PERSONALLY.....

Joan of Arc, the peasant girl from Lorraine, became the heroine of France by following what she called "VOICES" which came to her from God. In Bernard Shaw's play, Saint Joan, one of the officers asks:

"What do you mean....voices?....?"

And she replies:

"I hear voices telling me what to do.  
They come from God....."

Later in the play the weakling King Charles exclaims:

"Oh your voice, your voices! Why don't they come to me? I am king, not you!"

Joan answers:

"They do come to you, but you don't hear them. You have not sat in the field in the evening listening for them. When the angelus rings, you cross yourself and have done with it; but if you prayed with your heart, and listened to the thrilling of the bells in the air after they stop ringing, you would hear the voices as well as I do!"

So it is. The voices do come to us when we open our ears to them. God speaks to us. He seeks us. But we're too busy...or too skeptical...

or too selfish....or too sinful....or too proud to hear him. Our spirits are dulled by our crowded lives. We must come in from the noise and confusion of the street to the quiet place of the sanctuary. In the quiet time of prayer, we shall be claimed by his love. That is proof enough. And more often than not, it is the peasant and not the king who hears and understands. In the first place then, the parable speaks of GOD'S INTEREST IN HUMAN BEINGS.

GOD IS PATIENT WITH  
HUMAN WEAKNESS.

In the second place, God is patient with human weakness.

Jesus probably told this parable of the lost sheep in defense of his own actions. In the eyes of the Pharisees, he had been keeping company with the wrong kind of people. He had been seen with publicans and sinners. Publicans were Jews employed by Rome to collect taxes. They were often despised and unpopular. The sinners were not only those engaged in loose living, but also those who were careless in keeping the Jewish Law. Jesus was under suspicion because he showed a concern for those who had neglected their mechanical religious duties.

In answer to such criticism, Jesus told this story of the lost sheep. He said that God was concerned not only with those INSIDE the fold, but also those who had strayed away.....the LOST. The word "Lost" doesn't imply some kind of theological damnation. It simply means that men get lost like sheep, that is, not from deliberate wickedness, but from weak wills and carelessness. They wander away. They turn their backs on God.

Jesus says that God does not go away and leave these misplaced persons. God is patient with their wilfulness. He goes in search of them like a shepherd searching for lost sheep.

Surely there is meaning in this for us today. Many people today are lost. They are lost in their own conceits.....

They are lost in their own self-interest....

They are lost in some hard sophistication and cynicism...

They are lost in all of their possessions....  
God has become unreal to them, NOT BECAUSE they have denied him, but simply because they have wandered away from him. So many other things are claiming their attention.

I often get amused at some of the advertisements which reveal the peculiar ailments of modern man. There are those of us, we're told, who suffer from Paring Knife Finger and Dated Skin. Then there are those poor individuals who have coffee nerves, Five O'Clock Shadow, and Night-time Jitters. Others fall victim to Transportation Fatigue, and Bridge Table Slump and Acid Mouth. What pathetic symbols there are of a heart hungry generation. We try bravely to overcome these frailties of ours and many others like them with potions and pills, lectures and lettuce.

But our real trouble lies deeper! We suffer basically from an inner hunger at the heart of life because we have left God out! We have nothing against him....

We haven't rebelled.....

We've just gone our own way, nibbling one promising sedative after another until we are lost.....LOST BECAUSE LIFE HAS LOST ITS MEANING.....

This is the real trouble of modern man.....

It is good to know that in all of this that God has not forgotten us. Even though we may have lost our way, we are not outside his sphere of love and care. He is willing to forgive us for being headstrong....

He understands the frailty of the flesh.....

He knows the strong temptations of life.....

However bleak and lonely the way, we must know that God quietly and patiently cares.

GOD HAS FAITH IN  
HUMAN NATURE:

The third idea growing out of this parable is that God has faith in human nature.

The shepherd never makes a careless and half-hearted

search for the lost sheep. He never gives up. He looks until he finds it.

In other words, Jesus is saying that God believes in us....

That it matters to God that one life should be wasted....

Jesus is confident that every single life can be brought to full stature by the redeeming love of God.....

Human nature can be purified and redeemed. Indeed, God has more faith in us than we have in ourselves or in one another. Sometimes our best efforts fail. Human reformation is not enough.

In 1811 an aristocratic ALLAN family in Virginia adopted a two year old orphan. The child was the son of two traveling actors who had died. To the childless Allans it was as a gift from the MAGI. They planned to educate him as a southern gentleman.

However, he BALKED at their efforts to train or discipline him. As a last resort the Allans sent him to a private school in England when he was six. But even there he failed to make good. Five years later he came home. Finally, when the lad was 21, in one more effort to salvage him, the foster father arranged for admission to West Point. But he soon was discharged from West Point.

Several years later the Senior Allan became very ill. The boy was sent for. But when he entered the sickroom, the old man rose from his bed and struck him in the face. His dying wish was that the boy be put out of the house at once. Later Mr. Allan died. He never knew that the boy was to be famous as EDGAR ALLAN POE. But even that wouldn't have helped. In spite of his genius, Edgar Allan Poe was a drunkard and a spend-thrift until he died. Sometimes we are apt to lose faith in human nature, but GOD never does.

Skip across the country and down the years. In Los Angeles, in 1951, a revival meeting was in progress. A man dropped in to pass the time before taking a plane to St. Louis. His name was Jim Vause. He had come out of World War II as a master in the field of electronics. He had drifted

into the employ of big time gamblers on the West Coast. He was receiving large fees for wire tapping and other special communications jobs.

Jim Vause stood in the rear of that revival meeting outwardly indifferent. When the call came for a decision to the Christian way of life, a man near by quietly tapped Jim on the shoulder. "WILL YOU GO FORWARD WITH ME?" he asked. Jim whirled on him. "LAY OFF ME," he said. The other man spoke, "YOU CAN DO ANYTHING YOU LIKE TO ME, BUT THAT WON'T RIGHT THINGS BETWEEN YOU AND GOD!"

Something clicked inside Jim Vaus at that moment. He did go forward. He was found by God. He made a decision to break clean with his old life. He became an active worked for God. And later he learned that the plane he might have taken was met at St. Louis by rival gangsters who had orders to kill him. Yes....God has a faith in our own weak human nature far beyond our own faith. He can reach out and save us when all human efforts at reformation fail.

Most of us, to be sure, are not drunkards, crooks or spend-thrifts. But for many of us our human nature has been stunted by a crass, selfish materialism. One of our weekly news magazines told of "CHRISTMAS ON 57th STREET". A store here in the city had staged a fashion show for gogs.

One haughty hound modeled an evening coat of sequins....

Another patient puppy showed a polo coat for the country....

For delicate dogs there was a red raincoat with matching hood.....

As the magazine said, "ALL OF THEM WERE TO BE HAD ON EAST 57th STREET, A LOCALITY WHERE NEW YORKERS WHO DON'T NEED ANYTHING SHOP FOR THINGS THEY DIDN'T KNOW THEY WANTED."

This situation is <sup>not</sup> confined to 57th Street. It's true of the modern sophisticate and materialist on Main Street the world over. How many of us are people who don't need anything, as far as physical wants are concerned, shopping for things we didn't know we wanted.



Certainly God made man for something better than this. We need God even though we may not know it.

God BELIEVES in us even if no one else does....

God calls us to forsake the cheap and superficial....

God can CHANGE human nature.....

It is the love that God has for us that can save us from getting lost in a harsh, hard world of things. Does God care what happens to us us?.....

God does care!

FIRST: He is so very interested in human beings.

SECOND: He is patient with our human weaknesses.

THIRD: He has great faith in human nature.

#### LET US PRAY:

Grant, Our Father, that what we have said with our lips and heard with our ears, we may believe in our hearts. And what we believe in our hearts, we may practice in our lives. In Thy name we pray. Amen.

Jesus calls us from the worship of the vain world's golden store,  
From each idol that would keep us, "Saying Christian love me more!"

In our joys and in our sorrows, Days of toil and hours of ease,  
Still he calls, in cares and pleasures, "Christian love me more than these."

Jesus calls us! By Thy mercies, Saviour, may we hear thy call,  
Give our hearts to Thine obedience, Serve and love Thee best of all.