

Little Ones

Matthew 18:10-14

Remember how this chapter started. A question among the disciples, a foolish question, “Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” And remember Jesus’ answer. He put a child into their midst and said,

v.4 “Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

Of course, he went even farther, didn’t he? He made the application for everyone, “Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.”

So a little child is the greatest of all. A humble, trusting, dependent little child—that’s the picture of greatness. Not the most powerful person. Not the most eloquent, or the most influential. Just an ordinary, simple, uncomplicated little child. And as Jesus declares, all of you disciples must repent of your pride and become like that child, you must become like that little one.

Jesus then gives such a blessing to those little ones, and provides a necessary warning, too.

v.5 “Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me. 6 “But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea.”

As we come to verse 10 this afternoon, Jesus is still focused upon the little ones, now a symbol for all believers, all Christians. Little ones, little children. That’s all of us. And how we all

appreciate that image, for no one will gather attention quite like a little one, a little baby. Just let one little baby enter a room, and every eye will turn. Every face will smile. Always, everywhere.

But, still, there can be a sense of disdain. A sense of indignation. A sense of superiority, with reference to little children. We adults can become dismissive of them, or even look down upon them scornfully, assigning derogatory names like “rug-rats” or “crumb-snatcher.” We can think of children as a bother, an intrusion, a distraction, or simply as unwanted. And Jesus rebukes that sort of thinking, by assigning a great value to little ones in terms of “their angels” in heaven.

I. LITTLE ONES AND ANGELS.

v.10

So let’s look at this sin of pride. The warning is clear, isn’t it?

A. Beware the sin of pride.

“Do not despise one of these little ones.” Don’t look down on them, somewhat literally from the Greek. Don’t think lowly of them. Don’t belittle them, nor look upon them with contempt. Because that disdain is nothing but pride, your pride. Thinking badly of others really is nothing but thinking too highly of yourself. “At the root of all self-exaltation lies sinful pride.”

Paul says it so well, in a positive sense, in,

Phil. 2:3 “Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself.”

Similarly, Rom.12:10 “Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another”

Show honor, not contempt! Give honor, rather than looking down with condescension.

And, Eph. 4:1 “I...beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, 2 with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love”

So there is no place for disdain in the body of Christ, no place for anyone to preserve a position of importance for themselves while relegating someone else to a lower status. And we all need to beware that sort of pride. And put to death what often seems so natural to the fallen man. We all need to hear, frequently, that encouragement and rebuke, “in humility count others more significant than yourselves.”

Jesus has a particularly powerful way of emphasizing that honor given to the “little ones.”

v.10 “...for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven.”

So what about angels? First, let me explain a very wrong idea that often comes from this verse, and it is the idea of a guardian angel assigned individually to a particular person. The 4th Century Catholic teacher Jerome is quoted this way, “How great the dignity of the soul, since each one has from his birth an angel commissioned to guard it.”

This idea of a guardian angel is especially popular in Roman Catholicism, though it is clearly a cherished thought with much sentimental attachment among many denominations of Christians. A guardian angel is an especially appealing concept with reference to children. And many people today would certainly think that each little child is assigned their own personal guardian angel.

There is even the danger among Catholics to offer prayer to their guardian angel, and there are clear and dangerous warnings to those who are given to spiritual mysticism with subjective claims of ongoing interactions and conversations with their guardian angels. We always need to be very careful not to go beyond what the Scriptures teach.

So what is wrong with the concept of guardian angels? Most of all, that the Bible never assigns one angel to one person, but rather identifies the angels as a whole to be ministering spirits.

Heb. 1:13 “But to which of the angels has He ever said: “Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool”? 14 Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation?”

So the angels are servants, servants of God’s people. And they are real! Please understand me. I believe in angels, and I believe in their personal service to God’s people. That’s true in both the Old and New Testaments.

Ps. 91:11 “For He shall give His angels charge over you, To keep you in all your ways.”

Angels are created beings, they are creatures. And they were created good. Sadly, some fell, led by Satan, but as they remain identified as angels in the Bible, they are the un-fallen creatures who both inhabit heaven and minister to God’s people on earth. So the idea of a personalized, individual guardian angel seems to be something of sentimental addition to the biblical data.

Interestingly, though, we read of at least a common understanding of particular men having angels. Remember, Rhoda?

Acts 12:13 And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a girl named Rhoda came to answer. 14 When she recognized Peter’s

voice, because of her gladness she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter stood before the gate. 15 But they said to her, “You are beside yourself!” Yet she kept insisting that it was so. So they said, “It is his angel.”

Better to evaluate that as a sense of overwhelming amazement or even some measure of superstitious fear, than to construct a doctrine of guardian angels upon that single event. The point is, God sends his angels as needed wherever and whenever he wills, and here in Matthew 18:10, he notes the importance of all of God’s little ones by stressing,

B. The blessed ministry of angels.

Look at what Jesus does say.

v.10 “Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven.”

So what does that mean? Surely it is reading too much into this passage to assume that “little ones” are assigned the most important of all the angels, as if “these angels” have greater access or a closer proximity to God the Father in heaven. Surely we don’t want to imply that there was any competition or rivalry among the angels, or any prominence to some people on earth because of the assignment of a prominent angel in heaven.

Let me give an explanation offered by John Calvin, “God embraces with wonderful love the little ones. It would be strange indeed that a mortal man should despise, or treat as of no account, those whom God holds in such high esteem. He proves this love from the fact, that angels, who are ministers of their salvation, enjoy intimately the presence of God...We ought therefore to beware of despising their salvation, which even angels have been commissioned to advance...For the words of

Christ do not mean that a single angel is continually occupied with this or the other person; and such an idea is inconsistent with the whole doctrine of Scripture, which declares that the angels encamp around the godly, and that not one angel only, but many, have been commissioned to guard every one of the faithful. Away, then, with the fanciful notion of a good and evil angel, and let us rest satisfied with holding that the care of the whole Church is committed to angels, to assist each member as his necessities shall require.”

These angels are greatly blessed, for they see the presence of God who is in heaven; or as Jesus says it with his own words, they see the “face of my Father who is in heaven.” The angels are welcomed into God’s presence, for they have work to do their before the throne, work on behalf of these little ones. The angels are blessed, for they have a welcome in heaven, and a dear familiarity in dealing with the one whom Jesus calls “my Father who is in heaven.” And all of the little ones of God’s people are to be given honor and glory, because of the ministry of these angels on their behalf.

But then, as Jesus describes it, some little ways go astray!

II. LITTLE ONES GONE ASTRAY.

Personally, that is always a painful and grievous experience. And Jesus, the good shepherd, puts himself in that role. The shepherd always looks for the sheep. And sheep, by nature, are prone to wander. At our best, we sing the words of the familiar hymn, “O to grace how great a debtor daily I’m constrained to be; let that grace now like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to thee. Prone to wander—Lord I feel it—prone to leave the God I love; here’s my heart, O take and seal it, seal it for thy courts above.”

Those words ring so true in terms of our own experience. At

best, we still feel it, don't we—prone to wander. At worst? Well, you understand the parable of the lost sheep, don't you? And I hope you understand that,

A. God pursues the lost.

v.12

The answer is yes! Yes he does! He leaves the 99 and pursues the one who is lost! Maybe, you say, that's unfair to the other 99. Maybe, you think, he should just give his attention and his approval to the 99 who stayed, but that isn't how the Bible reveals God. "If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them goes astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine and go to the mountains to seek the one that is straying?"

Luke gives to us the broader application of that parable in terms of heaven.

Luke 15:7 "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."

God pursues the lost, and,

B. God rejoices in those who return.

Surely there is joy in heaven over the faithful saints who serve the Lord with love. Surely there is joy in the faithfulness of those who walk with the Lord day after day. But we're told even greater joy for the one who went astray and returned. So "do not despise one of these little ones," not even the one who went astray. Do not despise the one who fell into sin, and crushed by that sin, has come back. Don't look down upon the repentant sinner because of his sin!

I hope, with humility, you understand the parable of the

prodigal son.

Luke 15:11 "A certain man had two sons. 12 And the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me.' So he divided to them his livelihood. 13 And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living."

Little ones go astray. Sadly, many parents have felt that very grief within their own family. The Lord knows that grief, and the Lord himself is pictured in that parable. And the Lord's joy is the focal point of the parable, expressed in this joyful father. I will continue to read,

Luke 15:20 "And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. 21 And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 "But the father said to his servants, 'Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. 23 And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; 24 for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' And they began to be merry."

To quote another hymn we often sing, "I was a wandering sheep, I did not love the fold; I did not love my Shepherd's voice, I would not be controlled." Verse 2 is this, "The Shepherd sought his sheep, the Father sought his child; they followed me o'er vale and hill, o'er deserts waste and wild; they found me nigh to death, famished and faint and lone; they bound me with the bands of love, they saved the wandering one."

That's God! In so many ways, it is amazing. Intentionally so. God doesn't make it hard to repent. He doesn't make it

burdensome, but delights in repentance. He rejoices in your repentance. That's what the Psalmist means,

Ps. 51:17 "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, A broken and a contrite heart—These, O God, You will not despise."

Likewise,

Ps. 34:18 "The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart, And saves such as have a contrite spirit."

That's what the prophet Isaiah means,

Is. 57:15 "For thus says the High and Lofty One Who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: "I dwell in the high and holy place, With him who has a contrite and humble spirit, To revive the spirit of the humble, And to revive the heart of the contrite ones."

So if you are wandering, God will pursue you. And he will rejoice in your repentance. So turn to him, that he might forgive you your sin. Give to him, even today, that sacrifice of a broken and contrite heart, knowing that, "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit."

There is an obvious conclusion to all of this, that,

III. GOD PROTECTS HIS LITTLE ONES.

He preserves their life.

A. Preservation of life.

v.14

They will not perish, but have everlasting life.

John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

Ultimately, the work of the shepherd is to preserve the life of the sheep. Never is that idea clearer than when John writes in,

John 10:11 "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. 13 He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. 14 I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep."

Later in the chapter, we read,

John 10:27 "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. 28 And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. 29 My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand."

The sheep will live. That's the job of the shepherd! And, that is the will of God. Jesus takes this whole matter back to,

B. God's will.

God's decree. God's plan. God's purpose.

v.14

John 6:32 Then Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, Moses did not give you the bread from heaven, but My Father gives you the true bread from heaven. 33 For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." 34 Then they said to Him, "Lord, give us this bread always." 35 And Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst. 36 But I said to you that you have seen Me and yet do not believe. 37 All that the Father gives Me will come to

Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out. 38 For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. 39 This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day. 40 And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day.”

Did you hear that declaration of God’s will? “All that the Father gives me will come to me.” “This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing.” “This is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day.”

Jesus came to accomplish his father’s will, God’s own eternal will and purpose. Those words have great importance in the Bible, because they refer to God’s plan of salvation, God’s eternal plan of salvation. Paul describes that as a great spiritual blessing!

Eph. 1:4 “...just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, 5 having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, 6 to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved...11 In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will.”

God works all things according to the counsel of his will. And that means that none of his little ones should perish. Indeed, “in heaven their angels always see the face of My Father who is in heaven.”

So what do we do? How, then, should we respond? How, then should we live? First, with the grateful acknowledgement of his love for you as his sheep. And learn to embrace that image for yourself, with all the humility that goes along with it. You are a sheep, prone to wander. And God is a shepherd who preserves your life.

People of God, sheep, don’t ever forget this promise of the gospel,

1 Peter 2:24 “...who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness —by whose stripes you were healed. 25 For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”

So worship him! Sing his praise.

Ps. 100:1 “Make a joyful shout to the LORD, all you lands! 2 Serve the LORD with gladness; Come before His presence with singing. 3 Know that the LORD, He is God; It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; We are His people and the sheep of His pasture.”

As God’s little ones, sing with David,

Ps. 23:1 “The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. 2 He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. 3 He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name’s sake.”