

THE CONDITIONS FOR GREATNESS

MATHEW 18:01–04

Introduction – Greatness

The disciples argued over who should hold the highest positions in the kingdom of God. This conflict arose on several occasions (see Mt. 20:20-28; Mk. 9:33-37; Lk. 22:24-30). Their desire was for recognition and honour in an earthly kingdom. Jesus had to re-educate their thinking. The disciples' struggle for position and power should not surprise us, for all men have the same needs, the needs for...

- some recognition
- some authority
- some position
- some esteem
- some prestige
- some challenge
- some money
- some physical satisfaction

There is nothing wrong with these needs. They are human and legitimate needs and they must be met. But men allow their hearts to be overtaken with *selfishness* and begin to want more and more to the point of lusting and consuming and hoarding. They become prideful, covetous, worldly, ambitious, envious and hurtful even to the point of destroying and killing.

What Christ sets out to do is to change the lives of men and re-educate men in their concept of greatness.

- I. Two true assumptions (vv. 1-2).
- II. Condition 1: conversion (v. 3).
- III. Condition 2: humility (v. 4).

I. *Mathew 18:01–02 Two True Assumptions*

Note the two true assumptions in the question of the disciples. First, a person is great if he is in the Kingdom of Heaven. Second, there are degrees of greatness.

Christ did not refute or deny these assumptions. On the contrary, He taught both: a person is great if he is in the Kingdom of Heaven. Everything and everyone in heaven is great, even perfected. As Christ says, a person can be *the greatest* in the Kingdom of Heaven (v. 4. See scripture and notes, Mt. 13:8, 23; 25:20-30; Lk. 12:41-48; 16:10-12; 19:15-23). The question is not “who is the greatest” but how does one become *great* in God's kingdom? How does one prove that he is trustworthy and responsible before God? How does one show God that he can be trusted and depended upon and should be rewarded with responsibility in heaven (see notes, Mt. 25:20; Lk. 19:15; 22:28-29)?

Note several things about the question asked by the disciples.

1. Note what they meant. By “the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” they did not mean the greatest in quality or character, but in name and position. They were thinking in terms of power, fame, wealth, position and name (see notes, Mt. 1:1; *Christ, Messiah*,
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Mt. 1:18; *Baptism of Jesus and John the Baptist*, Mt. 3:11; notes, Mt. 11:1-6; Mt. 11:2-3; *Prophecy Fulfilled*, Mt. 11:5; *Messiah, Judgement*, Mt. 11:6; *Jesus, No Publicity*, Mt. 12:16; note, Lk. 7:21-23 for a picture of their concept of the Messiah).

2. Note the reasons why they asked the question.
 - a. They sensed that Christ was about to set up His kingdom, that He was about to assume His throne. They were looking forward to becoming chiefs of state in His kingdom.
 - b. They had seen three of them honoured in special ways (Peter, James and John, Mt. 17:1-13), and one of them in particular had been distinguished (Peter, Mt. 16:17-19). Who were the leaders to be in the Lord's kingdom? They were apparently gripped with jealousy, envy, ambition and some rivalry.
 - c. They had just been arguing among themselves about who the greatest was going to be. Mark says that the argument had begun immediately after Christ began to intensify His teaching on His death and resurrection (Mk. 9:33-34; see 9:30-37). They misinterpreted what He was saying, spiritualizing it instead of taking His Word at face value (see note, Mt. 17:22). Apparently they connected the thought of *rising from the dead* with the setting up of His kingdom, and began to argue over the top positions of leadership.
3. Note: they did not yet understand what the Kingdom of Heaven is. They still saw an earthly, temporal kingdom and not a spiritual, eternal kingdom. It is interesting what Christ said in v. 3. He was speaking to the disciples, and He *actually said* that they would not enter the kingdom of heaven unless they became as little children.

Christ gave a living demonstration of greatness. He “called a little child and had him stand among them.” The child was not an infant, for he was personally *called* to come to Christ. Note how the child immediately demonstrated several traits of children. He *trusted* Christ enough to respond (trustfulness) and did what Christ requested (submission, humility and obedience).

This says something about the nature and character of Christ as well. He demonstrated enough warmth and openness for the child to feel free to respond and to enter a group of adults who were sitting together in a formal session.

Thought 1. The thoughts of the average person focus upon appearance, personal image, self-esteem, possessions, privileges, position and glory, and he spends much time in thinking of these things. He imagines and fancies himself to be the centre of attention, the *hero* of the game or play, the main attraction, the one considered most honourable and esteemed. It is such thoughts and ambitions that Christ wants to change. Our thoughts and minds are to be centred on Christ and others and upon things that are true, not on self (Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 10:5; Ph. 4:8).

Thought 2. How often we think in terms of *earthly and fleshly greatness*. If we are asked who are the *greatest* people in a city or country, we answer by naming the

famous, the prestigious, the wealthy, the powerful and the educated. We think little, if any, of those who serve and minister.

II. *Mathew 18: 03 Greatness Requires Conversion*

The first condition for greatness is conversion. The word *conversion* or *change* (*straphete*) means to turn, to turn around; to be converted; to turn from one thing to something else (1 Th. 1:9, “how you turned to God from idols”). (See repentance for the same idea.)

The meaning here is that the disciples must *turn* they must turn completely around. Christ warned them: “Unless you turn.” Turn from what? Their sins were many, sins that are so common to men as they walk in selfishness day by day.

Note that they were possessed by a selfish desire for...

- position • fame • power
- wealth • prestige • fleshly stimulation

Note that they were possessed by a spirit of...

- pride • worldliness • covetousness • envy
- ambition • rivalry • jealousy

Conversion or change is one of the great subjects of the Bible. The reason is made clear by Christ: “Unless you change [be converted]...you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (v. 3). Whether or not a person is changed (converted) determines his eternal destiny.

1. How is a person converted or changed? By turning and becoming as a little child. What does it mean “to become like a little child”? When Christ *called* the child to Him, the child demonstrated exactly what Christ meant.
 - a. The child *trusted Christ*. The child responded to the call of Christ. He sensed the openness, warmth, tenderness, care and love of Christ; so he felt free to respond and to trust Christ’s call.
 - b. The child *surrendered* himself to Christ. He was willing to give up what he was doing and go to Christ, willing to surrender whatever it was that was occupying his thoughts and behaviour.
 - c. The child was *obedient* to Christ. He obeyed and did exactly what Christ requested, and it was probably difficult to do so. There were at least thirteen adult men standing or sitting there, and the child was being asked to walk into the midst of these men. Note that he obeyed despite the difficulty and obeyed simply because Christ asked him.
 - d. The child was *humble* before Christ. All the above traits show humility. However, there is something often overlooked and abused by the adult world. Little children do not push themselves forward. They are not interested in prominence, fame, power,

wealth or position. They do not want to be placed in the midst of a group of adults, for they prefer to be in the background, away from staring, gawking eyes. Such embarrasses them and makes them feel self-conscious. Therefore, they prefer to be left in their obscure world. They are by nature humble, knowing little if anything of the competitive world that surrounds them; that is, they know little of it until they are brought into it by adults.

2. Why is a person to be converted or changed? Because not changing brings rejection and loss of greatness. Note that the warning is severe: “Unless you change [be converted]...you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” And Christ is speaking to the disciples. “Unless they are converted and become as little children, they will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

If the disciples were warned, how much more are we and everyone else warned! The absolute necessity of conversion or change is hereby stressed.

***Mat 18:3** And he said: “I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”*

***Acts 3:19** Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord.*

***James 5:19-20** My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.*

***Psa 51:12-13** Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you.*

***Psa 19:7** The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple.*

***Isa 55:7** Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.*

***Ezek 18:21** “But if a wicked man turns away from all the sins he has committed and keeps all my decrees and does what is just and right, he will surely live; he will not die.*

***Thought 1.** Note that the very traits possessed by a child are the essentials for conversion or salvation: trust, surrender, obedience, and humility.*

***Thought 2.** What Christ is after is the total conversion or change of a person, a change that is complete and thorough: a change of heart, life, and thoughts. Our thoughts make us what we are. And, oh, how they are centred on self, making ourselves the centre of attention.*

***Psa 131:1-2** My heart is not proud, O Lord, my eyes are not haughty; I do not concern myself with great matters or things too wonderful for me. But I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me.*

Acts 8:22 Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart.

2 Cor 10:5 We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

III. Mathew 18:04 Greatness Requires Humility

The second condition for greatness is humility.

1. How does a person become humble? By living as a child. The child had humbled himself to come to Christ. Christ said so.
 - a. The child had given up what he was doing. Whatever it was that was occupying his thought and time, he walked away from it. He humbled himself in order to come to Christ.
 - b. The child had obeyed Christ. He went to Christ. Obedience always demands humility, a humbling of oneself (thoughts, energy, time, effort) in order to do whatever another asks.
 - c. The child overcame feelings he had in order to respond to Christ. Because of the twelve men surrounding Christ, there was bound to be some hesitation, dread, apprehension or fear; yet he humbled himself and went to Christ despite all. Humility has always been one of the most *insignificant* traits among men, yet it determines whether a man enters heaven or not. It is of critical importance.
2. The result of humility is greatness. The greatest persons in the Kingdom of Heaven will be the persons who have been converted (changed) and walked the humblest among men. 1 Cor. 13 says exactly what Christ is demonstrating.

1 Cor 13:4-7, 13 Love is patient, love is kind, it does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres....And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

Thought 1. Men fear humility. They feel that *humility* is a sign of weakness and cowardice. They fear humility will make them the object of contempt and abuse. They fear humility may cause them to be passed over, but the very opposite is true. Humility leads a person to Christ and to conversion. It leads a person to realize his full potential. It causes a person to evaluate himself and to work at improving himself. It leads a person to become all that he can and should be. It also leads to better and more healthy relationships and to a stronger and more productive community and world.

When men consider others (humble themselves), they win friends and influence people. They build and strengthen everyone and everything involved.

Mat 18:4 *“Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”*

Luke 22:26 *“But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves.”*

Rom 12:3 *For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.*

Phil 2:3-4 *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.*

James 4:10 *Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.*

1 Pet 5:5 *Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” ■*

WARNING AGAINST OFFENDING, MISTREATING A CHILD MATHEW 18:05–10

Introduction: Christians' Responsibility

Christ used *the child* (see Mt. 18:1-4) as an object lesson to teach that believers have an awesome responsibility for watching over one another. The Jews used the word child in two ways. It referred either to a small *child* or to a disciple of some teacher, a beginner in the faith. In this passage, Jesus used the word *child* to refer to three persons (see note Mk. 9:42; see *Millstone*, Mk. 9:42; *Death by Drowning*, Mk. 9:42).

1. It means a small child.
2. It means a beginner in the faith, someone who has just been converted and become a newborn child of God. This person is a new Christian; therefore, he knows little about the Lord and about how he is to live. Hence he is very impressionable, and he can be easily misled or confused.
3. It means any believer who has a childlike spirit and character. This childlike spirit is the very spirit about which Christ has just spoken (Mt. 18:3-4). It is the spirit He desires and expects in every follower of His.

Christ cares deeply for children, for all who have the childlike spirit and character. He calls those who follow Him “little ones” (18:6; 10:42). The depth of His care is clearly seen in this passage, a passage that lays a terrible responsibility upon all men — a responsibility that is unmistakably clear and so desperately needed. Christ gives three terrible warnings against causing a child to sin, and He spells out the three terrible offenses against a child, “little ones who believe in” Him (v. 6).

- I. The child represents Christ (v. 5).
- II. Offense 1: leading a child astray (v. 6).
- III. Offense 2: being a stumbling block (vv. 7-9).
- IV. Offense 3: despising and degrading a child (v. 10).

I. *Mathew 18: 05 Children Represent Christ*

The child represented Christ. The word for *welcomes* (dechetai) means to receive a child in every way possible.

- ⇒ It means to welcome the child as a *person*: with tenderness, warmth, care, affection and love — no matter how low or unimportant or poor. Christ is contrasting *the child* with *the greatest person*, the person over whom the disciples had just been arguing (see notes, Mt. 18:1-4; 18:1-2).
- ⇒ It means to welcome the child when he is in need *physically* or *materially*, to feed, cloth, shelter, visit and help him (Mt. 25:35f; Jas. 1:27).
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=> It means to welcome the child *spiritually*, to help him grow, build him up, encourage and motivate him to follow Christ and to share his faith.

Note two reasons why we are to welcome the child.

1. The child represents Christ. To receive a child is to receive Christ. Whatever is done for the child is done for Christ.
2. Christ cared for each child, every single one. He said, “a little child”; that is, that single child is important to Christ. Christ does not want that child...
 - left out, feeling like a non-person, uncared for and unloved.
 - left in need physically or materially, having to scarp and scrounge around, surviving all alone.
 - left alone, not knowing how to follow Christ and how to grow spiritually.

Christ clearly said: to welcome and help “a little child like this” is to receive and help Him (see Mt. 25:35f).

Thought 1. Welcoming and being receptive and open to people and their needs are of utmost importance to Christ (see notes, Mt. 10:40-42).

Thought 2. There is an unbelievable lesson here, a lesson that is so often unheard of among men: to minister to people is much more important than “being the greatest” in an earthly kingdom (see notes, Mt. 18:1-4; 18:1-2). The point is simply this: *to welcome another person is to welcome Christ*, and welcoming Christ is much more important than *being the greatest*.

II. *Mathew 18:06 Leading Others to Sin*

The first warning is against leading a child astray. Leading a child, a follower of Christ, astray is the worst conceivable sin. There is nothing worse than leading another person into sin. In fact, it would be better to hang a millstone about one’s neck and cast oneself into the depths of the sea than to lead another person astray. This sounds severe, very severe. And it is. But note: Christ meant what He said and said what He meant. How do we know this? From three facts.

1. The *millstone* (mulos) spoken of by Christ was the huge millstone, the one that the oxen or donkey pulled around to grind the grain. It was not the small hand millstone used by the women to grind a little grain at a time. The very fact that Christ chose the huge millstone to illustrate His point shows just how great this sin is. The person would be held at the bottom of the sea by the most awful and terrible weight. The sin of leading a child astray is the worst imaginable sin; therefore, its condemnation shall be the worst punishment imaginable.
2. Drowning was a form of criminal punishment used by the Romans, but never by the Jews. The Jews saw drowning as a symbol of *utter destruction and annihilation*. They feared it. Even the Romans reserved it only for the worst criminals.

3. Christ *added to the fear* of His audience. He painted the picture of a stone around the offender's neck so that the body could never rise to the top and be recovered for proper burial. And then He added even more to the fear. He pictured the huge millstone, not the small one. Why? Why did He strike fear into the hearts of His hearers? The answer is clear: the sin of leading another person astray is terrible, and the offender must know the fate that is awaiting him.

There are several ways we cause others to sin.

- => By leading them into sin and teaching them to sin: "Oh, come on, no one will know. It's not going to hurt you."
- => By example: by the things we do. Example is not a direct proposition, so we are not necessarily aware that the *child sees* or is observing us. Nevertheless, he sees and learns from what we do: "If it's all right for him, then it is bound to be all right for me." "If he can do it and still work and play and get by as well as he does, then I can too."
- => By overlooking or passing over wrong; by giving soft names to it; by considering some sins to be merely *white sins*: "Oh, that's all right. There's not that much to it. It isn't going to hurt anyone. Don't pay any attention to it. Just forget it."
- => By looking, touching, and tasting some things that are socially acceptable but sinful to God. They are harmful and habit forming and physically stimulating when they should not be: "Wow, look at that." "Taste that." "Man! What a stir!"
- => By ridiculing and poking fun at, or joking and sneering at a person's attempt to do right: "Oh, don't be a fuddy-duddy. You're acting like a fanatic. You and your religion."
- => By persecuting and threatening *a child* or a believer. The threat can range all the way from loss of promotion, job, friendship or acceptance, to abuse, imprisonment and death.

Thought 1. A genuine believer, no matter how young or immature as a Christian, has "received a faith as precious as ours" (2 Pet. 1:1). Standing before God, a believer is on equal footing with all other believers. Of course, this does not mean they are to be given positions of leadership while they are young believers (1 Tim. 3:6, 10). It simply means that they are to be focused upon and taught and developed in Christ, not ignored and overlooked because they cannot yet contribute much to the work of God's kingdom.

Thought 2. There are some things that seem innocent enough, yet they can lead others astray (1 Cor. 8:10-11). A mature believer is not to abuse the young believer by his liberty (see notes, Rom. 14:1-23).

III. *Mathew 18:07–09 Being a Stumbling Block*

The second warning is against being a stumbling block. Note the outline points of the Scripture.

1. There is the certainty of sin in a sinful world. This is a sinful world, full of evil behaviour. No one can walk out into the world without facing temptation after temptation and pull after pull to look, touch and taste — to experience the *good life* of physical gratification and earthly comfort and personal fulfilment. We are tempted, seduced and influenced by it at every turn. There is no escape (see Rom. 3:9-18).

1 John 5:19 *We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one.*

Rom 3:23 *For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*

2. There is the warning to the sinner. Every man is personally responsible for his sin. The fact of a sinful world does not lessen a man's personal responsibility. He cannot blame the world, society or others: for man...

- has free will
- has the knowledge of much good
- has the pull to do good (at least initially)
- usually has examples of goodness
- can choose to do good
- can work to overcome and strengthen his weakness

Most of all, man has God who provides a way to escape temptation (1 Cor. 10:13). The sinner is personally responsible. Every sin becomes a stumbling block to others! The man who sins becomes the stumbling block over which others can fall!

3. There is the way to handle the sin of being a stumbling block. Again, the severity of the language shows the severity of the sin. There is no greater sin than being a stumbling block to one of God's dear children.
- a. Christ says "cut off the hand that causes you to sin": force the hand away, pull it back, push it aside. Let the hand that sins have no part of you. Deny the hand's presence, its existence.

2 Cor 6:17-18 *"Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters," says the Lord Almighty.*

Christ says "cut off the foot that causes you to sin": Remove it, take it away from the sin. Make the foot of no use and the body will be immobilized for you. Remove the foot and your body cannot go to the sin; take the foot far enough away that you will have time to think of the consequences. Deny the foot's presence, its existence.

Eph 5:15 *Be very careful, then, how you live — not as unwise but as wise.*

Col 2:6 *So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him.*

1 John 2:6 *Whoever claims to live in him must walk as Jesus did.*

- c. Christ says “pluck out the eye”: Turn away from the sight; leave it; don’t look. In fact, make sure you cannot look upon sin. Deny the eye’s presence, its existence.

Mat 5:28 *“But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”*

1 John 2:16 *For everything in the world — the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does — comes not from the Father but from the world.*

Prov 10:10 *He who winks maliciously causes grief, and a chattering fool comes to ruin.*

Eccl 1:8 *All things are wearisome, more than one can say. The eye never has enough of seeing, nor the ear its fill of hearing.*

Eccl 4:8 *There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth. “For whom am I toiling,” he asked, “and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?” This too is meaningless — a miserable business!*

Note that it is the *hand that touches* the sin, the *foot that takes* one to the sin or to the place of sin, and the *eye that looks* upon the sin and leads to the desire and lust for the sin. The way to escape is to deny self (see *Cross and Discipleship*, Lk. 9:23; see outline, Rom. 6:11-13) and to draw nigh to God (see Jas. 4:7-10).

4. There is the escaping of the punishment, which is worth any price. The most horrible death imaginable is death by fire. Just imagine burning and burning in everlasting fire. There is no more terrible punishment than that described by Christ. How horrible eternity apart from God must be. The severity of hell again stresses the severity of the sin in God’s eyes.

Luke 17:1-2 *Jesus said to his disciples: “Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come. It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin.*

Rom 14:13 *Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother’s way.*

Rom 14:15 *If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died.*

Rom 14:21 *It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall.*

1 Cor 10:32 *Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God.*

2 Cor 6:3 *We put no stumbling block in anyone’s path, so that our ministry will not be discredited.*

1 John 2:10 *Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble.*

Thought 1. The world is full of people who are stumbling blocks, people who are...

- bad examples • deceivers • seducers
- false guides • tempters • persecutors

Thought 2. Note several logical facts.

- 1) *A righteous God* knows unmistakably who is a stumbling block to the *little child*.
- 2) *A righteous God* knows exactly at whose feet to lay the guilt for causing a *little child* to stumble.
- 3) *A righteous God* knows precisely who ruins the precious soul of a child, preventing the child from being saved.
- 4) *A righteous God* will reckon with the man who causes a *little child* to stumble — severely and eternally. He is righteous: therefore He has to deal severely, matching the punishment to the evil.

Thought 3. Note a critical fact: the hand, the foot, and the eye are the sinner's own hand, foot and eye. He is sinning as well as causing another to sin. He is damaging and destroying his own life as well as the life of a child. He is dooming himself as well as the child to hell.

Thought 4. This is strong language, very descriptive and severe in its point. But honesty and thought are called for in seeing the point of Christ. What on earth is more horrible than leading a child astray and being a stumbling block to his salvation, dooming him to what Christ calls "the fire of hell" and "eternal fire." If God really loves the *little child* as Christ says, and if the *fire of hell* is real, then strong and severe language is needed to awaken the world to the truth.

MATHEW 18:08

THE FIRE OF HELL, ETERNAL FIRE (TO PUR TO AIONION)

*"If your hand or your foot causes you to sin cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire." **Mathew 18:08***

This is the first time the words *eternal fire* are used. The words point to an awful fate, a terrible and horrible eternity. Eternal means for the duration, on and on without end. The fact that the unforgiven sinner is to suffer so great a punishment should cause all sinners to cease being stumbling blocks. It should stir them to become stepping stones to God (see *Hell Fire, Gehenna*, Mt. 5:22; *Paradise, Hell*, Lk. 16:23; *Hell, Torment*, Lk. 16:24).

Mat 3:11 *“I baptise you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”*

Mat 18:8 *“If your hand or your foot causes you to sin cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire.”*

Mat 25:41 *“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.’”*

Mat 13:42 *“They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”*

Rev 21:8 *“But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars — their place will be in the fiery lake of burning sulphur. This is the second death.”*

Isa 33:14 *The sinners in Zion are terrified; trembling grips the godless: “Who of us can dwell with the consuming fire? Who of us can dwell with everlasting burnings?”*

Isa 66:24 *“And they will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind.”* □

IV. Mathew 18:10 Despising and Degrading Children

The third warning is against looking down upon a child. There are several ways that a child or a believer is looked down on or despised.

1. By considering the child unimportant. He is not considered as competent as others; therefore, he is neglected, ignored or pushed aside. As a result, his growth and potential for life and service are untapped or stifled and stunted.
2. By doing unbecoming things in the child’s presence: by disregarding the child’s presence and going ahead with one’s *off colour* language and jokes, *little white lies*, and socially acceptable but sinful habits.
3. By twisting the child’s mind or body into evil behaviour and sin. This can range all the way from sinful ambition and self-seeking to child abuse through sexual deviation and murder.

Acts 13:41 *“Look, you scoffers, wonder and perish, for I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe, even if someone told you.”*

Rom 2:4 *Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness leads you toward repentance?*

Heb 10:28-29 *Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace?*

2 Tim 3:1-3 *But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy; without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good.*

2 Pet 2:9-10 *If this is so, then the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment, while continuing their punishment. This is especially true of those [the wicked] who follow the corrupt desire of the sinful nature and despise authority. Bold and arrogant, these men are not afraid to slander celestial beings [authority].*

Thought 1. Children have a most favoured position before God. The fact that their guardian angels “*always see the face*” of God shows this. There could be no greater privilege than to be before God always “*seeing His face*.” Children are very, very precious to God. For this reason alone, we should do all we can to rid ourselves and the world of evil. ■

MATHEW 18: 10 ANGELS

“See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.”

Mathew 18:10

See *Angels*, Heb. 1:4-14. We must always remember that Christ came from (ek, out of) the spiritual world, out of the dimension of heaven, to reveal heaven to us. He taught the reality of angels, that is, heavenly messengers. Here He teaches that children have “guardian angels” who have direct access to God. This fact is a warning to the offender: every sin and stumbling block placed before His children (believer, v. 6) is brought before Him, so no offense will go unpunished. It is also an encouragement to every child of His: the child will be vindicated and can depend upon God Himself to vindicate Him.

Heb 1:14 *Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?*

Luke 15:7, 10 *“I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons*

who do not need to repent.... In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

Psa 34:7 *The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them.*

Psa 91:11 *For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. □*

THE PARABLE OF THE LOST SHEEP: THE SUPREME EXAMPLE OF CARING

MATHEW 18:11–14

Introduction

This is one of the most famous parables shared by Jesus — the parable of “The Lost Sheep” or the parable of “The Seeking Shepherd.” It holds a great message for both the believer and the unbeliever, and Jesus applies it to both. Two things show this.

1. The words “these little ones” refer to genuine Christian believers, and the word “lost” refers to the unsaved person (see note, Mt. 18:5-10).
2. On this particular occasion Jesus was speaking to His disciples (Mt. 18:1). In Luke Jesus shared the same parable with a different audience and directed it more toward the lost.

Some believers are weak, never having grown in the Lord; others cool off and wander away; still others backslide into sin and shame. Some are stubborn toward the Lord, and some become self-centred because of hurt and neglect. Others allow the hurt and neglect to develop into bitterness and hostility against a person, and go out and sin in anger. There are innumerable reasons for sinning, but believers do sin, and some sin rather seriously.

The one who strays and the one who is lost are always with us. The thing to remember is this...

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

- I. Jesus came to save the lost (v. 11).
- II. Jesus seeks every lost one (v. 12).
- III. Jesus may or may not find lost one (v. 13).
- IV. Jesus forgives and rejoices over the lost one who is found (v. 13).
- V. God declares a wonderful truth: God wills that not a single soul be lost (v. 14).

I. *Mathew 18:11 Jesus Christ, the Saviour*

Jesus came to save the lost. Note that the NIV eliminates verse 11 here. We are including the verse and discussion in the commentary for those who wish to use it. The verse reads, “The Son of Man came to save what was lost” (v. 11).

This is the Messiah’s great statement of purpose; this is why He came to earth. He came to save the lost. There is a world of meaning in this great statement.

1. It means that Christ willingly and deliberately *left* the glory of heaven and His equality with God and “made Himself nothing” of that glory and equality (see notes, Ph. 2:6; 2:7).
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2. It means that both the world as a whole and man as an individual have gone astray. Each person has strayed away from God, is lost, and is wandering about in a wilderness of sin; and each person is doomed to be destroyed by that wilderness unless he is reached and saved by Christ. Everyone needs to be saved (Rom. 3:10-18, 23; 10:13; Jn. 3:16; Acts 10:43; 1 Jn. 5:1).
3. It means that *God lost man*. God lost man's worship and service and life. Not only has man *gone astray*, not only is man *not seeking* after God and gone out of the way — but he has become unprofitable, *lost to God* (Rom. 3:11-12). While man remains lost *in the wilderness*, God has no hope of fellowship with man. Man's worship, service, and life are lost to God as long as man remains lost. The words "that which was lost" should be noted. They are in the Greek neuter participle. This means that the person lost is not only man (masculine) but woman (feminine) as well. "That [neuter] which was lost" and sought after is both man and woman. The point is to show the span of Jesus' love: He loves all who are lost, both man and woman. No one is outside the scope of His love and seeking. He loves and seeks after all.

Thought 1. Note a striking truth: not only is man lost, but God has lost man and man has lost God. Both lose out and suffer when man chooses to wander out into the wilderness of the world and sin. Man has so much to gain from following God (Jn. 5:24; Gal. 5:22-23), and God has so much to gain by man's choosing to follow God (worship and service eternally).

II. *Mathew 18:12 Jesus Christ, the Seeking Shepherd*

Jesus seeks every single sheep that is lost. Christ made three significant points.

1. The sheep wandered off (see *Wilderness*, Mt. 18:12).
2. The sheep was sought by the shepherd. Note several facts.
 - a. The Shepherd takes care of the whole flock, the ninety-nine, in a very special way. While seeking the lost sheep, He leads the flock *into the mountains or hills* where the pasture is thick with grass and safe and secure. He makes sure that they are secure (Jn. 10:27-29).
 - b. The Shepherd's concern is for the individual, no matter how large the flock. He loves the individual. He is unwilling to lose a single one.
 - c. The Shepherd is the One who does the seeking. He does not hire or send another person after the lost sheep. Neither does He wait for the sheep to return, and most interesting, He does not even allow the care of the ninety-nine to keep Him from going after the one lost sheep. The fact that the sheep is lost is so important a matter to Him that He personally goes after the sheep — no matter the cost.
 - d. The Shepherd is patient and enduring. He seeks and seeks after the sheep until He has either found it or else He knows there is no hope of the sheep's being alive.

e. The Shepherd seeks every path, ridge and crevice; He uses every means at His disposal to find the lost sheep.

=> The Shepherd depends upon the hardness, danger, trials and sufferings of the wilderness and the heart, conscience and memory of the sheep to turn it around and begin seeking a way out.

=> The Shepherd depends upon his own knowledge of the sheep and wilderness to search for the sheep. The Shepherd knows every ridge and crevice of the wilderness. It is just a question of finding the sheep soon enough. Has the lost sheep gone too far out on a ridge, too far down into a crevice to be found? Has the lost sheep already been killed by enemies or the roughness of the wilderness?

=> The Shepherd depends rather heavily upon His voice to reach the ears and the heart of the lost sheep. By calling and calling, He hopes the lost sheep will hear Him. Whether He hears or not depends upon two things. (1) How far out into the wilderness the lost sheep has wandered? Can the sheep hear the voice of the Shepherd? (2) Does the sheep still have strength enough to answer (respond) even if he hears the voice of the Shepherd? Is the sheep so drained and sapped by the wilderness that he cannot answer? Or is the sheep injured or dying, unable to answer the call of the Shepherd?

Mat 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?”*

Luke 19:10 *“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.”*

John 9:35 *Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him, he said, “Do you believe in the Son of Man?”*

3. The sheep was sought in the mountains (see note 3, Lk. 15:4 for the reasons a sheep wanders off. The reasons are simply stated here.)

=> The sheep is attracted by something “out in the open country or wilderness” away from the flock and shepherd.

=> The sheep is aimless, not paying attention to what is going on.

=> The sheep refuses to heed the shepherd’s warnings and the other sheep’s example.

=> The sheep is not attached enough to the shepherd or to the other sheep.

Thought 1. The Shepherd knew “the lost sheep.” He had a large flock to tend, but He knew every single one. When “the lost sheep” got lost, the Shepherd knew it. He missed the sheep, and He went after it.

Thought 2. When a child is lost, a family stops everything to seek for the lost child. It does not matter how large the family is, the child is sought.

MATHEW 18:12 WORLD, WILDERNESS, OPEN COUNTRY

*“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?” **Mathew 18:12***

The sheep was lost in the open country or wilderness. The open country had an excitement about it. The unknown and the risk aroused the emotions; but once the sheep ventured out into the open country, he found its terrain rugged, full of narrow ridges and deep ravines and crevices. It was rough going, heavy with thick underbush, pricking thorns, dangerous footing; and, if the way out were never found, it would sap the sheep's strength and age him ever so rapidly. Eventually the open country would take its life.

The open country and thrills of the world do attract a person. The world has much to offer.

1. The world gives a man...

- occupation and purpose
- ego and self-esteem
- more and more honour
- plenty and wealth
- authority and power
- lifestyle and acceptance
- recognition and privilege
- position and image
- opportunity and satisfaction

2. The world stimulates and arouses a man, causing...

- his blood to rush
- escape
- butterflies
- cravings
- goose bumps
- desires
- his heart to beat faster
- relaxation

1 John 2:15-16 *Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world — the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does — comes not from the Father but from the world.*

Gal 5:19-21 *The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.*

Jer 50:6 *“My people have been lost sheep; their shepherds have led them astray and caused them to roam on the mountains. They wandered over mountain and hill and forgot their own resting place.”*

Ezek 34:6 *My sheep wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them.*

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

III. **Mathew 18:13** *The Lost; Unsaved*

Jesus may or may not find the lost sheep. Finding the sheep is not a sure thing. It depends on so much...

- How far astray has the lost sheep wandered? Can the lost sheep hear the voice of the Shepherd? Or is it too far off?
- Is the lost sheep willing to respond when it hears the Shepherd's voice?
- Is the lost sheep *going on and on*, farther and farther into the wilderness or open country?
- Has the lost sheep been so careless and unconcerned that it has been injured by falling into a deep crevice?
- Is the mind of the lost sheep so numb that it is unconscious of the Shepherd's presence and voice?
- Is the lost sheep aware that it is lost? If so, how concerned is it over being lost?
- Is the lost sheep concerned enough to begin searching for a way out of the wilderness or open country?
- Has the patience of the Shepherd ended? Has he given up? Has so much time passed that He knows there is no longer any hope?

Thought 1. A person may resist the spirit of God so long and wander so far into the wilderness of the world that he can never be found.

Thought 2. God says, “My Spirit will not contend with man forever” (Gen. 6:3; see Prov. 29:1). This is a needful warning, for when we feel pulled to make a decision and put the decision off for an hour or two (a half day or a day at most), the pull fades and eventually dies completely. God's Spirit does not continue to strive with us. Most of us have experienced such movements and killed the Spirit's pull or striving.

Gen 6:3 *Then the Lord said, “My Spirit will not contend with man forever, for he is mortal; his days will be a hundred and twenty years.”*

Prov 29:1 *A man who remains stiff-necked after many rebukes will suddenly be destroyed — without remedy.*

IV. *Mathew 18:13 The Joy of Salvation*

Jesus forgives and rejoices over the recovered sheep. The extreme joy is not because the lost sheep means more than the other sheep. The safe sheep have always filled the Shepherd with joy and peace, but there is a special moment of joy and celebration when a lost sheep is found. There are at least two reasons for this.

1. The lost sheep was almost *lost forever*, never to be known again or to share in and contribute to the life of the flock. All that the lost sheep meant and was capable of contributing was almost lost forever. There is bound to be great joy and glory over his being snatched out of the claws of danger and death.
2. The lost sheep cost so much of the Shepherd's life: His thoughts, energy, effort, time and sufferings. There is great joy and glory when the trial is over and the task is successful. The effort was well worth the price.

Note the great appeal to the lost sheep to return to the Shepherd. There is...

- no grudging • no punishment • no contempt
- only love • no lecture • only concern
- no rebuke • only seeking • no threat

Luke 15:6-7 “And goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”

John 4:36 “Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests the crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together.”

1 Th 2:19-20 For what is our hope, our joy or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy.

Heb 12:2 Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

Psa 126:6 He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him.

V. *Mathew 18:14 Will of God: the Salvation of Every Man*

God wills that not a single sheep should be lost. In verse ten Jesus had said “My Father,” but here He switched to “your Father.” This is significant: when the Saviour *finds* each of us, we become a member of *our Father's* family. As a member, He expects our help in reaching the lost sheep and in caring for the flock. Being a member of the family carries with it the responsibilities of reaching the lost and of helping to care for the other members of the family.

Note two things.

1. The Father is not willing that any should be lost.

1 Tim 2:4 *Who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.*

2 Pet 3:9 *The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*

2. Christ died for the weak brother as well as for the lost.

Rom 14:15 *If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died.*

1 Cor 8:11 *So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge.*

Thought 1. This is critical: God cares for every single person. What a contrast with our lack of concern when just one or two wander off. What a lesson for us! The concern of God for a single soul! ■