

Little Children and the Kingdom - Pt. 2

Matt. 18:10-20

Intro. There's a story about an old backwoods farmer and his wife who won a trip to New York City. Their prize included lodging and meals in a luxurious downtown hotel. After registering at the hotel lobby, the clerk pointed them to the elevator and told them their room was on the fourth floor. Now the couple had never seen or used an elevator. They watched in amazement as the stainless steel doors opened and an elderly woman stepped inside. The doors then closed. A few minutes later the doors opened again and out stepped an gorgeous young woman. Rubbing his eyes with wonder and excitement, the farmer turned to his aged wife and said, "*Quick honey, get in there!*"

When Jesus said "**I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven**" He was obviously speaking figuratively. None of us can turn back the clock or step into a magic elevator and become youthful again. But unlike the disciples who measured greatness by rank and performance, toddlers exemplify people who are humble and not so wrapped up with who they are / what they do / and what they think they deserve. The **change** Jesus is equivalent to the verb **repent**. **Repent** or change your mind, was the first word in the sermons preached by John the Baptist, Jesus and the apostles after them. With all the passion of heaven, God's servants urged people to change their minds...to acknowledge their sinfulness / to admit their helplessness / and to recognize their need of God's salvation. Unless we think right about sin, righteousness and God's coming judgment, we will never enter the kingdom of heaven. With empty hands, each person must come to Christ this humble way.

To understand this chapter it's essential to know that the terms **little ones**, **children**, and **brothers** represent those who believe in Jesus. Each of us must enter God's family by way of the new birth and each of us arrives with childlike understanding. The Church is a birthing center / a hospital / and a school of grace all wrapped in one.

While a child can exemplify many different traits, Jesus zeroed in on just one...a child's humility. Children are needy and they know it. They need others to do for them. They have little to contribute besides themselves. A child's life is simple and uncomplicated. Yet their willingness to trust those who are bigger and older creates vulnerability. Isn't an eerie thing when an Amber Alert sounds from our cell phones in the middle of the night? A child is in danger. Instinctively our hearts go out to a child who is missing and has perhaps been abducted. Because Jesus is lovingly and permanently joined to those who trust Him, **(v.5)** His teaching in the rest of this chapter transitions to our protection. He begins by warning any who might lead a little one away from Him into sin or unbelief. **But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. (v.6)** The **woe** pronounced in **v.7** is a solemn word that appears about 100x's in our Bibles. It's a word of warning reserved for the most serious crimes and the most severe consequences. Jesus addressed this severe warning to anyone who causes those who believe in Him to sin.

In **vs. 8, 9** Jesus includes believers in this warning. We who believe must never excuse sin or take it lightly. Grace must never become a license for bad behavior. Jesus said it would be better to surgically remove offending body parts than to allow them to create a stumbling block to someone else. None of us live in a vacuum or a bubble. Our sin is never isolated. Sin always creates a ripple effect that affects others around us. Out of his murderous heart, Cain asked, "**Am I my brother's keeper?**" The Bible responds from cover to cover... "*Yes Cain, you are!*" God holds us accountable for the welfare of our brothers and sisters in His family. We're responsible to be the right kind of example to everyone around us whether they're saved or unsaved.

Last time I said there's an underlying theological theme in **Matt.18**. I hope you're beginning to sense what it is. It's the theme of God's loving concern for the welfare of His children...a love He wants to reproduce among the children within His family. He wants His family to practice the same sacrificial concern for others that sent Jesus to the cross. The Church that pleases God is an assembly of humble people who think more highly of others than themselves. By His grace working in each life, it will be a place of compassion, not condemnation...a place of healing, not harming. So once again, the loving protection of God is the underlying theme in this chapter.

Now I realize this introduction is a bit long, but we need to see this chapter as a tight unit with a single flavor and theme. And one of the most encouraging themes in the Bible is the theme of God as the Protector of His people. Many of the Lord's names reflect His ability and commitment to protect those who belong to Him...His children. A few examples of these Hebrew names translate...**Shield / Fortress / Hiding Place / Keeper / Refuge / Rock / Shade / Shelter / and Stronghold**. These names and many others represent the loving protection God provides for His children. As we grow in faith we learn to say, God is my **Shield** from anything or anyone who would harm me...God is my **Hiding Place** when conflict arises...God is my **Shelter** in the time of storm. God is my **Rock** when all else is falling apart. With the psalmist we say...**in God I trust; I will not be afraid. – Psalms 56:11**

Here's a couple of questions every unsaved person should ask: *Who is my protector? When people let me down, who has my back? Who stands up for me when life dishes out it's worst? Who speaks in my defense when Satan airs my dirty laundry? Who has the authority and power to neutralize the Adversary determined to destroy my soul in Hell?* I can't speak for you, but I need protection! I need someone with compassion and power sufficient to take me from here to heaven. And the Lord Jesus is the only One who qualifies! He proved His ability to defeat even death on our behalf. As Paul declared in **Rom. 8:31 - If God is for us (and He is), who can be against us?**

The vast majority have been lied to. Satan has deceived the world to believe that sin is inconsequential and eternal punishment is an idle threat made up by controlling personalities. They feel God's commands are restrictive, depriving them of everything good and pleasurable. A cartoon Pastor Jerry's son sent to him last week illustrates this mentality and the true purpose behind God's laws. If you're a young person, the family rules your parents expect you to obey are no different. They're laid down as guardrails to protect, not fences to restrict! And while you're thinking about this cartoon, don't forget that guy's terrifying freefall and sudden stop at the bottom. Too many people crash and burn before they realize God's laws are an expression of His loving concern. So God is blessed when His children lovingly protect each other. This is what **Matt.18** is about. It's about God's loving protection practiced within His family...the church

1. Loving protection within the family – vs.10-14

v.10 begins with **a command...See that you do not look down on one of these little ones**. Let me repeat it again...in **Matt. 18, children, little ones and brothers** represent people of every age and stripe who believe in Jesus. The same is true in **Matt. 25:40** where Jesus said, **"I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for Me."** Some interpret this verse in **Matt. 25** as a general commendation for benevolence and social action. It was wonderful that so many generously donated water for the residents of Flint. In hind-sight, I wish MBC had done more to help. But this sort of benevolence is not what Jesus was talking about in **Matt. 25:40**. The context of **Matt. 25** is the judgment that follows the Great Tribulation. The acts of kindness are said to be done for Christ Himself because they're done for His **brothers** in a time of great distress. This is affirmed in **Mk. 9:41** where Jesus said, **I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward**. So remember... **children, little ones, and brothers** refer to believers in Christ.

The word translated **look down on** is *kataphroneo* which has the literal meaning of *thinking down on* or *thinking less of*. The KJV says **do not despise**. It commands us to not diminish or regard someone as inferior or dismiss them as unworthy of consideration or care. We are not to write off anybody because their social status / economic situation / appearance / age / race or whatever, turns us off. To **look down on** is to grant ourselves license to treat a child of God with disregard and contempt.

A graphic illustration of **looking down on** someone is found in **Jas. 2:1-4 - My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism**. Our Greek professor taught the meaning of **v.1** with passion and conviction. His personal transliteration of **v.1** went something like this... "*How dare you call yourself a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, and show favoritism! If the Lord of glory stooped down to lovingly meet the needs of the poor and lowly, how dare you lift yourself up to discriminate against any one of them!*"

Then James gave an illustration for his readers to think about. **Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?** The example is so clear and pungent, it needs no comment. James is the earliest written book in the NT. From the early days of the Church this sin of **looking down on** others had already surfaced. The rich were given preferential treatment and the poor were despised and treated with disdain.

The command of **v.10a** is then followed by three *considerations* in **vs.10b-14**. From these considerations we should figure out why no fellow believer should ever be **looked down on**.

- *the ministry of angels* – **v.10b - For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.**

I really wish I knew more about angels. The fact is, the Bible doesn't tell us everything we'd like to know. **Psa. 91:11, 12** says, **For He will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.** Angels are here seen in their role as guardians of God's people. They **guard** us in all of our ways. **Heb.1:14** says, **Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?** The idea that every believer has a personal guardian angel is comfy and nice, but it's more like an urban legend that isn't supported by Scripture. Instead of thinking of angels working a man to man defense, it seems more accurate to see them in a zone defense. In Daniel the angel's assignments seem more territorial than personal. But the point of **v.10** is this...God has charged the angels of heaven to guard / protect / and serve His family on earth. If God's loving concern for each child is that extensive, we should never offend / look down / or do harm to any one of them!

- *the care of the Shepherd* - **vs.12, 13 – "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? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off.**

In **Jn.10:11** Jesus said, **"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.** Bible interpretation is simplified when we allow one verse or passage to interpret another. Since Jesus identified Himself as the Good Shepherd, it makes sense to see Him as the shepherd in His itinerant ministry of seeking and saving the lost. So **vs.11-13** represents the loving concern of Christ toward **little children** who like defenseless lambs tend to wander off and get lost.

I remember the 30 minutes of sheer panic we suffered the day our grand daughter Haley got separated from us at a theme park. No one in our family said, “Hey, 1 kid missing out of 10 isn’t bad.”

This parable appears again in **Lk.15:3-7** where it was given to the Pharisees. There Jesus used it to defend His compassion for sinners...compassion far more intense than any shepherd has for a single lamb when 99 others are safe in the fold. But here in Matthew, Jesus used this parable to illustrate His loving concern for each individual lamb and the lengths He will go to prevent the little ones who believe in Him from ever being lost. The wonderful reality is this...The Christ who because of love saves us is also the Shepherd who faithfully keeps us. Amen?

So listen to the parable and write in your name where Jesus says **one sheep**. **"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? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off.** Jesus said, think about it disciples...remember that I am the Good Shepherd who loves you too much to ever let you wander off and be lost. In case you didn’t notice, there’s eternal security in this story.

- *the will of the Father - v. 14* - **In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.**

The phrase **in the same way**, indicates the connection between the ministry of angels / the shepherding work of the Son / and the Father’s will that none be lost. The point is this...if a shepherd celebrates the one lamb that wandered off and is found, how could we dare influence any of Christ’s **little ones** to go astray? How could we dare **to look down on** any who are so loved? The angels guard and protect them / the Good Shepherd is actively involved in their welfare / and the Father is unwilling for any of them to be lost. The person who offends or **looks down** on any one of God’s children is acting in direct defiance of God’s will and that’s dangerous business. And once again, don’t miss the security and assurance affirmed here. At the end of the day...at the end of the age of grace...not one member of Christ’s family and flock will be missing! His protection is just that reliable!

2. Loving discipline within the family – vs. 15-20

In the context of family and the loving protection and authority of heaven, Jesus then explained how His people should deal with a family member who sins. The particular sin seems to be an offense committed against a fellow believer though it may not be limited to that. Whatever the sin may be, it always amounts to **looking down on** or disregarding the worth of some brother or sister. We can’t lie, cheat, injure, or lust after someone without diminishing their worth. Yet isn’t that what happens? Evil speaking and bad behavior is often justified when we think of people as objects instead of human beings made in God’s image and likeness. We sin against brothers and sisters when we forget that each one is a soul for whom Christ died. Let me say a couple of things before we delve into these verses:

- First, no instruction in the NT is neglected more than the command to practice discipline in the church. Some dismiss this instruction because they have a faulty idea of what “**Judge not lest ye be judged**” actually means. Some don’t practice discipline out of fear of lawsuits or because the process is unpleasant. Still others have given up on church discipline because it rarely works. The sinning member seldom repents...instead, they leave and go up the street to another church that welcomes them. How would you feel if your child behaved that way... and quite frankly, some do? Because of this neglect and disobedience to Christ’s command, the Church is riddled with sinful behavior and the power of God’s Spirit is quenched.

- Second, Christians tend to isolate these verses from their context. We tend to think of these verses as steps for ridding the Church of sinners. We fail to realize the context of **Matt. 18** is loving protection for God's children. Discipline isn't the same as punishment. Discipline is remedial and restorative. It's an act of loving concern. **Heb.12:6** says **...the Lord disciplines those He loves...** For this reason, **Gal. 6:1** says, **Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently.** The goal of church discipline is restoration and preservation, not vindication or exclusion.

In **vs.15-17**, Christ's instructions for loving discipline are detailed in four steps.

1. The first step is private reproof. v.15 - If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. The old evangelist Charles Finney said... *"If you see your neighbor sin, and you pass by and neglect to reprove him, it is just as cruel as if you should see his house on fire and pass by and not warn him of it."*

Notice that, **a brother** is in view. We have specific responsibilities toward our brothers and sisters... responsibilities we don't have towards those who are unsaved and outside of Christ. Notice the aim is to **win him over**, not to punish him or drive him away. The offended believer who takes this step must first make sure there isn't a beam in his own eye. He must then approach the offender in true humility and love. If the sinning brother listens (which means he agrees); you have won him over. **Lk.17:3** - summarizes this first step...**If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.**

2. The second step involves a private conference - v.16 - But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' Implied in these steps is the motive of keeping the matter as private as possible for as long as possible. When something like this happens, the tendency is to tell others all about it instead of obeying Christ's instructions and going to the offender. One purpose for including witnesses is for the offended party to gain some objectivity. The witnesses can help to establish the wrong that has been done, but they also strengthen the reproof by representing the Church. As the Church developed, the spiritual leaders were the ones to fulfill this obligation. If the offender refuses to repent, the spiritual leaders would serve as witnesses who could testify to the church about his/her response. But the goal of this semi-private conference is the same as it was in **v.15...to win your brother over...to persuade him to repent of his sin.** Because sin is so destructive, the motive is his protection and welfare.

3. The third step is public announcement - v.17a - If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; If the sinning brother or sister rejects the representatives who have come with the offended party, the leaders are to tell the Church about his sin and unrepentant attitude. **I Cor.12:14-20** reminds us that believers are members of one Body and that each member is responsible to care for all the others. At times, this loving care must take the form of discipline. Yet at each stage of the process, the offender must be given time and opportunity to repent.

4. The fourth step is Public exclusion - v.17b - and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. When the church has prayed and exhausted every effort to urge the offender to repent, they must remove him from their fellowship. In Bible times, **pagans** were those outside the divine covenants and blessings promised to Israel. They were not permitted beyond the outer court or to enter the sacred parts of the Temple. **Tax collectors** were traitors to Israel because they worked for the Roman government at the expense of their countrymen. **Pagans** and **tax collectors** were outcasts from the Jewish community. They became the example of what must become of an unrepentant child of God.

Jesus said the sinning brother who refuses to repent of his sin must be removed from the circle of God's people. Now hear me, Jesus said this. This is excommunication...it involves cutting a person off from membership / fellowship / and forbidding them from participating in communion. No longer is the unrepentant brother (if he truly is one) to share the activities and privileges of the congregation. In short, the unrepentant believer is to be treated like a non-believer because he/she has refused to conduct himself like a believer. This doesn't mean the guilty brother is to be **looked down on** or deprived of compassion. We remember how Jesus had compassion for even **pagans and tax collectors**. It means the guilty one must be barred from the community until he repents. Though it seldom happens this way...each member of the church should support the corporate judgment of the body because each of us is responsible to the Lord for purity and protection of His church. As strong as this measure may seem, it is designed to bring the erring brother to repentance and restoration. When practiced biblically, church discipline is an act of loving concern and a measure taken to protect the sinning believer and those who might be influenced by his/her bad behavior.

Though much more could be said on this subject, this section ends with divine authorization in **vs.18-20**. **"I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. "Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."**

Unfortunately, many have yanked these verses out of their context. The binding and loosing of **v.18** has been applied to all sorts of things. The fact is, these verses relate to heaven's ratification of decisions made by a church family in the matter of discipline. The promise assures us that when the church acts toward a sinning brother in obedience to Christ, we have the full support of heaven.

In much the same way, **vs.19, 20** are often quoted as a general promise about prayer...a promise that obligates God to do whatever we ask providing two or three people agree on it. Teachings on prayer are found throughout the NT, but the issue here is the discipline of a guilty believer. In context, the **two or three** who agree the same **two or three** witnesses in **v.16**. The text doesn't say *if they pray*...it says if they **agree**. **About anything you ask for** refers specifically to wisdom sought regarding the course of action taken with the sinning brother. The word, **anything** refers to *any matter* or *any offense* that might arise. The promise **it will be done for you by my Father in heaven** means that the judgment made on earth will be ratified and supported by the highest court...the court of heaven. Because they obeyed Christ's instructions and sought wisdom in prayer, God led them to a wise decision...His decision. Heaven's binding and loosing stands with the process on earth. Just like the great commission, **v. 20** ends with the assurance of Christ's presence. He is with us in the interest of protecting the one who has sinned and preserving the purity of His church.

Let me close with **Jas. 5:10** because it's a great summary of this section in **Matt. 18 - ...remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins. Matt. 18** is all about God's loving desire to protect His children from others / from themselves / and from the damaging effects of sin. The turning of a sinner spoken of in **Jas. 5:10** is the change that happens in the life of one who is humble enough to admit their sin. This brings us full circle to **Matt.18:1-4**. We can't become humble like a child by turning back the clock or stepping into a magic elevator. But humble is what God calls us to be! Humility is the primary virtue we must seek. It enables us to benefit from God's grace. It will prevent us from offending and looking down on others. And a humble heart will guide us do the right thing toward any who sin against us. The obvious course of action for those who have been forgiven of everything, is to forgive. But that's next time.