

Matthew 18:10-14

Introduction

In chapter eighteen, the fourth discourse of Jesus in Matthew, Jesus give us instructions on how to live together in community, as the true assembly of the Messiah. Chapter eighteen began with the disciples asking Jesus a question about who would be the greatest in the Messiah's new assembly ("Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?") Jesus responded by warning the disciples: "Unless *you* turn and became like insignificant little children surrounded by important grownups you will not even be granted *entrance* into the kingdom of heaven! But if the disciples' really want to talk about *greatness*, then they should know that the requirement for greatness in the kingdom is no different than the requirement for "getting in." Whoever assumes for himself the insignificant status of a little child surrounded in the assembly by important grownups – *this person* is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. So on the one hand, the disciples must turn and become like little children *themselves*.

But Jesus knows that by any *worldly* standard, His disciples *will* be holding the highest positions of "greatness" in His new kingdom assembly. That's why He goes on to tell the disciples that they must treat even the "least important" in the assembly with the utmost respect, and honor, and deference ("whoever receives one such child in my name receives me"). Jesus warns His disciples (and *us*) that it would be better for us to die a premature death by drowning than that we should ever live long enough to cause one of the "least important" of His disciples to stumble and fall. It's only as we take these words of Jesus to heart that we will ever be able to succeed at living in true kingdom *community*.

But then Jesus goes on to warn His disciples about the sin that resides in their *own* members and the extreme and radical measures they'll have to take every day in the battle against their *own* sin. "If your hand or your foot causes *you* to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for *you* to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes *you* to stumble, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for *you* to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire" (8-9). Now how do these verses "fit" in the midst of a discourse on *community*? Well, if we're really intent on identifying anything in *ourselves* that would cause *us* to stumble and place *us* in danger of falling away from the faith, then how much time do you think we'll have to be concerned about who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Will we really find it that difficult to think of ourselves as little children living in the midst of important grownups? If we're really taking action to cut off our own feet and hands and tear out our own eyes and throw them away, then how much time should we really have to be thinking about the honor, or appreciation, or respect that is "due" us? Will we really find it that difficult to show the utmost respect, and honor and deference to the most lowly and unimportant in the Messiah's assembly? If we've truly learned a holy trembling at Jesus' warnings of eternal hell fire, then how much energy will we really have to be thinking about our own importance and status in the assembly? Jesus is warning us that we cannot afford to be thinking thoughts of greatness! Instead, we *must* be giving all of our thought and energy to the full time task of putting to death our *own* flesh and our *own* sinful nature! And once again, it's only as we take these words of Jesus to heart that we will ever be able to succeed at living in true kingdom *community*.

But there's still more. After focusing in on the disciples' own personal struggle with sin, Jesus returns to the theme of the little ones, and how the disciples should be treating those who have the least "importance" and "status" in the assembly.

I. Matthew 18:10a — See that you do not despise one of these little ones.

Now I'm guessing that our first response to Jesus' words here might be something like this: "Well, that shouldn't be a problem. Why would I do that? Why would I *despise* a "little one" in the assembly?" "Despise" is such a strong word! We may think of scorn, and disdain and loathing. But our English word "despise" can also mean more simply to "look down on", or to "regard as negligible" and unimportant (Webster). And the same goes for the Greek word!

- ✓ Romans 2:4 — Or do you *think lightly of* [*despise*] the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience...?
- ✓ 1 Timothy 4:12 (cf. 6:2) — Let no one *look down on* [*despise*] your youthfulness...

When Jesus says that we must not despise "one of these little ones" He means that we must not think *lightly* of one of these little ones, or in any way look *down* on a person who appears to be of lesser status and importance in the assembly. Maybe now we'll be a little less quick to justify ourselves and assume our own innocence? But still, we're nice, and kind and "good" people, aren't we? We wouldn't think lightly of someone else, or *look down on* someone else just because that person is a "little one" in the assembly! We're so much more reasonable than that, aren't we? We've moved beyond such immature thinking. So then what are we really saying? — That Jesus was wasting His breath? Now I know that could almost sound disrespectful and irreverent, but I mean it very seriously. Jesus said *all* that He said *because* He knew the heart of man. But are we willing to say that our hearts are somehow an exception to the rule? Jesus told us not to despise one of these little ones precisely because He knew that this is exactly what we are *all* tempted to do! In fact, I believe it's because Jesus knows our hearts better than we do that He adds extra emphasis to the seriousness of His command: "***See that you do not*** despise one of these little ones." Or we could translate: "*See to it...*" So we must understand that each one of Jesus' commands is also a *diagnosis*. In every single one of Jesus' words of command, we are actually *convicted* of sin. We are all *tempted* to despise the little ones. And worse yet, we have *all* been *guilty* of despising the little ones (or anyone that we deem to be "littler" than we are). But how? In what way have we ever been guilty of such a sin? Jesus says: "See that you do not despise one of these little ones..."

II. Matthew 18:10b — For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.

Now what exactly does this mean? It's actually from these verses that we've inherited the popular idea of "guardian angels" with each person being assigned his own individual angel. But there is no real evidence for this idea anywhere else in the Scriptures, and it would truly be dangerous to base such an idea on this text alone. So what exactly does this mean? What's the significance of the fact that in heaven, the angels of these little ones are always seeing the face of God?

Well, the Scriptures show us the angels in two very important roles. One role is that of the guardians of God's holy presence (Isaiah 6; Ezekiel 1; Exodus 25:17-22). But the other role is that of carrying out the will of God and His purposes on the earth

- ✓ Psalm 103:20 — Bless the LORD, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his word, obeying the voice of his word!

But this role of carrying out the will of God and His purposes on the earth is *always* and *especially for the sake of God's children*. We see this throughout the entire Old Testament, but notice especially the following verses:

Psalm 91:11 — For he will command his angels [plural] concerning you to guard you in all your ways.

Luke 15:10 — I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.

Luke 16:22 — [Lazarus] died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side.

Hebrews 1:14 — Are [the angels] not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?

The angels are concerned first and foremost and above all else with our **salvation!** *Our salvation* is the *goal* to which all of their labors are directed. *Our salvation* is the ultimate *reason* for all that the angels ever do on our behalf. Any right understanding of the role of angels must be centered around the **Gospel**. So to paraphrase and expand Calvin, this is why these angels are called "*their* angels," because their labours are bestowed on the little ones for the sake of their salvation.

The fact that these angels always see the face of God means that God is always communicating to these angels His saving will for the little ones.* In other words, we should not understand these words *primarily* as a veiled threat or warning, but rather as more instruction and teaching intended to bring about right thinking and a proper perspective. When Jesus says that the angels of these little ones always see the face of God, I believe He is simply pointing out how very concerned God is for the *salvation* of these little ones, and for their *spiritual well-being*. When we think of these angels always seeing the face of God, we should think of God always communicating to these angels the one all important truth that it is not His will that even one of these little ones should perish (v. 14). And then we must imagine these angels being always sent forth to minister on behalf of the little ones, and for the sake of their *salvation*. Remember, this is *why* the angels are called "*their* angels"! In other words, "their angels" aren't always seeing the face of God for nothing (cf. Ps. 103:20)! They see His face so that they might *know His will for the salvation of the little ones*, and then faithfully go out and **serve the little ones for the sake of their salvation and growth in the Gospel**.

Now if this is the *reason* that we must not despise one of these little ones, then doesn't this give us a clue as to the kind of "despising" that Jesus had in mind? When we look down upon someone, or lightly esteem someone as of little importance, our natural tendency is to neglect that person – to leave that person a little more "unattended." And this can very easily happen in

* Cf. Abraham Kuyper (De Engelen Gods); referenced in Hendriksen

the context of the Assembly when through our own carelessness, we leave unattended the spiritual well-being of those who seem to have less “importance” and “status.” Notice that we’re not at all being spiteful! But should this bring us very much comfort and relief? Jesus says that we are still guilty of *despising* the little ones simply as a result of our “carelessness.” And this careless oversight, and neglect and inattention becomes especially terrible when we remember that “in heaven their angels always see the face of [God]”! Calvin says: “We ought therefore to *beware of despising* their *salvation*, which even angels have been commissioned to advance.” Or perhaps we could paraphrase Jesus like this: “Do not neglect the spiritual well-being of one of those who have less importance and status in the assembly. Do not be guilty of despising them through your careless lack of attention. For I tell you that in heaven, My Father is always communicating to their angels His will for their salvation, and that not one of them should ever perish (v. 14).” And then to drive this point home, Jesus goes on to tell a parable:

III. Matthew 18:12–13[†] (cf. Ezekiel 34:1-16) — What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray.

Now for many of us, we may associate this parable with the evangelism of the unsaved, and in Luke chapter fifteen Jesus does use this parable more along those lines. But here in Matthew chapter eighteen Jesus slightly reworks the parable and applies it not to the evangelism of the “lost”, but rather to the rescue of the “wandering.” Jesus asks, “*what do you think*”, because He wants us to be truly and fully convinced of the goodness and the beauty of God’s will. “*What do you think*? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?” Now the answer to this question is, “*Of course*, that’s exactly what a *good* shepherd would do.” But we can just imagine how some other shepherds might think: “I could go to a whole lot of time and trouble to find this sheep, and then at the end of my search have nothing to show for my efforts. But after all, I do still have ninety-nine sheep. I’ve lost one individual sheep, but I still have the *flock*. I’m only missing *one* out of one hundred!” But it’s this kind of thinking that Jesus warns us against so strongly – *because* He knows that this is just the kind of thinking that can be a temptation to all of us.

Notice Jesus’ emphasis on “*one*” in verses five and six: “Whoever receives *one* such child... but whoever causes *one* of these little ones who believe in me to sin...” And then notice the same thing in verse ten: “See that you do not despise *one* of these little ones.” And now in the parable of the sheep that went astray, we find again the emphasis on *one*, this time *one out of a hundred*. And then in verse fourteen Jesus will conclude: “So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that *one* of these little ones should perish.” As we live in community, we must remember that the *one* is important. We must not neglect the spiritual well-being of even *one*, of even the *least* person in the assembly. We must not be guilty of despising even *one* – even if he is the “*least*” person in the assembly – through our own careless neglect and lack of attention.

[†] Verse 11 (KJV; NKJV) was almost certainly inserted by scribes in light of Luke 19:10. Otherwise, there is no reasonable explanation as to why verse 11 would have been omitted by a significant portion of the Greek manuscript tradition.

God Himself is unceasingly communicating to the angels of these little ones His will for their salvation, and that not even *one* of them should ever perish. “We ought therefore to beware of despising their salvation, which *even angels* have been commissioned to *advance*.” But isn’t this just the very thing that in our wretched sinfulness we are tempted to do, especially when we see that the *one* who is “*least*” is wandering and straying from the truth? “Well, the church as a whole is still here. He or she is only one out of one hundred and forty. She never really has been a significant part of the assembly. She was just a beginner in the faith, and hadn’t yet proven herself to be genuine. He had always seemed to lack something in the way of true spiritual maturity. And now he’s wandering away, and straying from the truth. Well, this was probably coming anyway. It was inevitable.” And so we stay with the ninety-nine, and leave the *one* – the one who is *least* – to self-destruct. And perhaps we justify ourselves with Cain’s excuse: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” We comfort ourselves with the *ninety-nine*(!), and somehow keep our heads turned when the *one* sheep (especially the sheep that had the least importance and status in the assembly) wanders from the fold. In our sinful nature, is this not exactly what we are like? And if we won’t admit to consciously thinking such thoughts (probably because we are self-deceived), will we at least admit to the careless lack of attention that leaves us just as guilty?

Jesus says: “And if he finds it, *truly, I say to you*, he *rejoices* over it *more* than over the ninety-nine that never went astray.” Far from excusing and comforting ourselves with the ninety-nine faithful ones that remain, we should always find our *chief* comfort and our *chief* joy in the restoration of that *one* “*insignificant*” sheep that was wandering and going astray! One commentator says, “The faithfulness of the majority may never excuse us for ignoring anyone who still remains distant from God” (Blomberg). And someone else writes: “Jesus is trying to convert us to ‘the mentality of the one,’ to the importance of the statistically unimportant” (Bruner). But what if that one, insignificant sheep is never found? What if he is never rescued or restored, in spite of all our very best efforts? In other words, what if it turns out that the one we go in search of was never really a true part of the flock? Well, that’s none of our concern, is it? There is only *one thing* that is important for us to know. Jesus concludes:

IV. Matthew 18:14 — So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.

I think Calvin captures the essence of these verses when he writes:

“Matthew... teaches us not only that we ought to treat with kindness [even] the [“least”] disciples of Christ, but that we ought to bear with their imperfections, and endeavour, when they wander, to bring them back to the road... for the object of [these verses] is to lead us to beware of *losing* what God wishes to be *saved*.”

If we can’t plead ignorance of the Father’s will, then we have no excuse when we fail to mount a campaign for the salvation and spiritual well-being of the least brother or sister in our midst who might ever begin to wander away. If we know that God Himself is unceasingly communicating to the angels of these little ones His will for their salvation, and that not even *one* of them should ever perish, then we have no excuse when we despise that *one* through our own careless lack of attention. As we live in community, we must remember that the *one* is important. We must not

neglect the *spiritual well-being* of even *one*, of even the *least* person in the assembly. Every single one is important. It is not the Father's will that *one* of these little ones should perish. So then, let us beware of losing what God wishes to be saved.

Conclusion

Here, once *again*, is the secret to living together *in true community*, as the true *assembly* of the Messiah. In the context of this assembly, who is it that we would be most tempted to neglect or to carelessly overlook? What kind of person would he be? What would she look like? What would her story be? And then let's remind ourselves that in heaven, this person's angels are always seeing the face of God.

Now these verses have a special application to me, and to all of the elders, and so in one sense your application is to *pray* for us, that we would be faithful under-shepherds of God's flock. But these verses also apply to the community as a whole. We are *all* called to the exercise of a *pastoral* care and concern for one another. So may we never think to ourselves (*even subconsciously*): "We're only missing one out of a hundred." Far from excusing and comforting ourselves with the ninety-nine faithful ones that remain, let us always find our *chief comfort* and our *chief joy* in the **restoration** of that *one* "*insignificant*" sheep that was wandering and going astray (James 5:19-20; Proverbs 11:30; 24:11)!