

STUDY ON THE TEACHING OF JESUS

THE GREATEST IN THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN!

Read Matthew 18:1-20

The chapter begins with “At that time.” Jesus had been talking about his suffering and death; but it was as if the disciples were on another wavelength. They are concerned with who would be the greatest. These kinds of questions came from a group of men who had a limited understanding of the kingdom. If they were thinking of a purely human kingdom like David had, the questions might not have seemed to them out of order, but they were asking about the greatest in the kingdom of heaven which is not a human kingdom.

Jesus responded to their question with a demonstration—a child. Jesus might have answered the question, “who is the greatest?” by pointing to Himself. Instead, Jesus drew their attention to His *nature* by having them look at a child as an example.

“... “Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”” (vv2-4)

This was probably a great disappointment to the disciples. They knew that in that day, children were regarded more as property than individuals. It was understood that they were to be seen and not heard. Jesus said we must take this kind of humble place to enter the kingdom, much less be the greatest in the kingdom. Jesus then addressed the issue of greatness. When we most fulfil the humble place a child had in that culture, we are then on our way to greatness in His kingdom.

Children do not try to be humble, but they are so; and the same is the case with gracious people. The imitation of humility is sickening; the reality is attractive. The point is that the kingdom cannot be gained by merit or force. The disciples must change, they must become like children in their heart attitudes. The person who truly humbles himself will be the greatest in the kingdom.

What is Humility?

The Bible describes humility as meekness, lowliness, and absence of self. The Greek word translated “humility” in Colossians 3:12 and elsewhere literally means “lowliness of mind,” so we see that humility is a heart attitude, not merely an outward demeanour.

How We Treat Others (vv5-9):

“Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me.” (v5)

The first part of the teaching is a blessing: whoever welcomes a little child in the name of Christ welcomes Christ. Jesus was not meaning “little child” literally, but one who has humbled himself or herself to receive Christ by faith. They are the disciples. And they are not welcomed because they are great—they are welcomed because they are believers in Jesus. That is the basis on which the devout welcome disciples. This goes beyond mere hospitality; it presupposes the animosity of the world and is therefore the spiritual care of the devout followers of Jesus for the disciples of Jesus. To welcome them is to welcome Jesus into their homes.

“But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin...” (v6)

On the other hand, children are susceptible to danger and can stumble, even the greatest of them. So, the warning is given to those who cause these little ones to stumble. The idea is that by rejecting the

little ones, by not welcoming them, some will cause them to stumble in their discipleship. It may lead to serious sin; but it immediately concerns their following Jesus. Rejecting them is rejecting Jesus.

How many times do we find disciples in need, and we turn away? This also applies to those who walk out of faith because of the acts of another Christian including and especially leaders.

Because the crime is so great, that is, to cause the little ones, believers, to sin and turn away from Christ, the denunciation is also strong. The point is that the little ones, the disciples of Jesus, are under his care; and whatever people do to them, they are really doing to Jesus.

The Two Woes

The first woe is a cry of judgment for a world in full of offenses. The second woe is a warning to the one who brings or introduces evil (offense) to others. We live in a fallen world, and it is inevitable that sin and hurt and offenses come. Yet the person who brings the offense is guilty before God and has no excuse. This teaches us that we can let go of the anger and the bitterness for what people have done against us. God promised to deal with those by whom the offense comes.

Considering the judgment awaiting those who cause others to sin, it is worth it to sacrifice in the battle against sin. Verses 8 and 9 tells us to pay attention to whatever will cause offense, so we do not end up in hell fire.

If your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you: Some people only keep from sin if it is easy or convenient to do it. Jesus warns us that we must be willing to sacrifice in fighting against sin, that nothing is worse than facing the wrath of a righteous God. It really is better to sacrifice in the battle against sin now than to face the punishment of eternity later.

If I cut off my right hand, I can still sin with my left. If my left eye is gouged out, my right eye can still sin – and if all such members are gone, I can still sin in my heart and mind. God calls us to a far more radical transformation than any sort of bodily mutilation can address.

God Cares for the “Little Ones” (vv10-14)

The “little ones” are the believers, the ones who humble themselves and become like little children. If they do that, they will be among the Messianic community. But if any mistreat the little ones and oppose them, they will share the woes. The reason that the little ones must be treated with respect is because “their angels in heaven” always see the face of the father.

In what looks like the parable of the lost sheep, Jesus emphasized the love and care we should have for all in the Christian community. The first temptation is to despise one, because only one; the next is to despise one, because that one is so little; the next, and perhaps the most dangerous, form of the temptation, is to despise one, because that one has gone astray. The Father will go after every sheep.

So, if God rejoices over one straying sheep that is found, how would people dare cause any of the sheep to go astray? The father is unwilling for them to be lost; so, to try to scatter the sheep is to oppose the will of God.

This parable of the lost sheep shows us the character of God’s love, being like the care a shepherd gives for a lost sheep.

- It is individual love.
- It is patient love.
- It is seeking love.

- It is rejoicing love.
- It is protecting love.

Sinning Against Each Other vs Agreeing with Each Other (vv15-20)

Now Jesus explains how the members of his church should deal with someone who sins against another, or, more specifically, how to deal with someone who despises another brother.

The initial step is to confront the brother privately and show him his fault. The aim is to win him over, not to destroy him. The one who does this must do it with true humility and in love.

Then, if the private confrontation does not work, the next step is to take two or three witnesses and try to bring about a change. If the guilty person refuses to submit to the considered judgment of the church, then that one is to be treated as a pagan. Jesus has in mind here barring the guilty from the community until he repents. Each member of the church is to abide by the corporate judgment of the church with the responsibility of ensuring the good of the Christian community.

Disagreement, discord, and unforgiveness are all hindrances to prayer and the work of God in our lives. In the same breath where Jesus was teaching on sinning against each other, He stated the power available if we are in agreement or agreeable.

If two of you agree on earth: There is real power in agreement in prayer and in the presence of Jesus. This is exactly what the unrepentant ones miss out on. In the ancient Greek, agree is literally “to synchronise.” Jesus wants us to complement each other like a great orchestra. “It is a metaphor taken from a number of musical instruments set to the same key, and playing the same tune: here, it means a perfect agreement of the hearts, desires, wishes, and voices, of two or more persons praying to God.” We must take advantage of the power of agreement.

Now, looking at the context of Matthew 18:20, in terms of sinning against each other, Jesus is saying that as the witness (v16) and the church (v17) gather on the “matter of offense”, His presence is there in the midst of them. We use this this verse in the context of prayer like we have in v19 above, however, the context reveals “agreement in resolving the issue of offense” and Jesus presence in these gatherings.

