

The Gospel of Matthew, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 21: Greatness and the Lost Sheep

Matthew 18:1-20

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, Matthew 18 sets out the character of life within the kingdom and the church. It teaches that greatness in God's kingdom is measured by humility, not status, overturning the world's entire scale of values. It reveals the seeking heart of the Father, who counts a single straying soul precious enough to leave the ninety-nine and go after the one. And it gives the church the Lord's own process for dealing with sin among its members, a process of patient, escalating love aimed always at restoration, climaxing in His teaching on binding and loosing and the promise of His presence where His people gather in His name. Your students need to see that the church is not a club of the comfortable but a flock cared for by a seeking Shepherd, where humility reigns, the vulnerable are protected, the straying are pursued, and the fallen are restored.

But this passage is not only a doctrine of the church; it is a forming of the heart. Jesus aims to dismantle our pride, to make us tender toward the "little ones" we might harm or overlook, to give us the Shepherd's heart for the one who has wandered, and to teach us a love brave enough to go to a sinning brother and gentle enough to seek his restoration rather than his ruin. The chapter presses on our self-importance, our gossip, our indifference, and our cowardice, and calls us to the humble, seeking, restoring love that marks the people of Christ.

So teach for both targets. Help your class grasp what kingdom greatness really is, how precious one soul is to the Father, and how the church is to handle sin under Christ's revealed will. And send them home humbled, tender toward the vulnerable, burdened for the one who has strayed, and ready to love a struggling brother enough to go to him the way Jesus describes.

Question 1

Student Question:

When the disciples ask who is greatest, Jesus says they must "turn and become like children" even to enter the kingdom (18:3-4). What does childlike humility actually mean here, and what does it reveal about the values of God's kingdom compared to the world's?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin with the disciples' question, because it reveals the heart Jesus is about to confront: "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (v. 1). They have absorbed the world's assumption that the kingdom, like every human institution, runs on rank and importance. Jesus is about to overturn that assumption completely.

Notice His method. He does not deliver an abstract lecture; He places a child in their midst. In that culture children had no status, no power, no leverage. They were utterly dependent, low on the social ladder, and that is precisely the point. Jesus says, “unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (v. 3).

Clarify what childlike humility means and does not mean. It is not childishness, immaturity, or naivety. It is the lowliness and dependence of a child: making no claim to status, gladly receiving rather than achieving, content to be small. “Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (v. 4). Greatness is not climbing higher; it is bowing lower.

Draw out the doctrinal contrast. The world measures greatness by power, wealth, achievement, and recognition. The kingdom of God reverses the scale entirely. This is the same mind we see in Christ Himself, who did not grasp at status but humbled Himself (Philippians 2:5–8). To enter and to flourish in His kingdom, we must be remade according to His values, not the world’s.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Humility as the entrance requirement and the measure of greatness in the kingdom (18:3–4)
- Childlike dependence, not childishness, as the model (1 Peter 2:2)
- The reversal of the world’s scale of values in the kingdom of God (Luke 14:11)
- The humility of Christ as the pattern for His people (Philippians 2:5–8)
- Entering the kingdom by turning, a change of direction and heart (Matthew 18:3)

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between childlike humility and mere childishness?
- How does the kingdom’s measure of greatness differ from the world’s?
- Why must we “turn” and become like children even to enter the kingdom?

Question 2

Student Question:

Jesus measures greatness by humility, not status. Where do you catch yourself quietly competing, comparing, or seeking recognition, and what would it look like to “become like a child” in that area?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This first self-examining question presses the teaching on humility into the student’s heart. The disciples’ competitive question, who is greatest, lives in all of us, usually in quieter forms. We may not ask it aloud, but we keep score.

Help students name the subtle ways pride shows up: comparing ourselves with others, fishing for compliments, resenting those who get the recognition we wanted, needing to be noticed,

quietly ranking ourselves above someone else. Pride is rarely loud; it is usually a hum beneath the surface.

Then turn toward the cure. To “become like a child” in a particular area means to let go of the need for status there, to serve without being seen, to celebrate another’s success, to take the lower place willingly. Humility is not thinking less of ourselves but thinking of ourselves less.

Ask students to identify one specific arena, work, family, church, online life, where they compete or crave recognition, and one concrete way they could practice childlike humility there this week. The goal is honest, gentle conviction that leads to real change, not shame.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The persistence of pride and comparison in the believer’s heart
- Humility expressed in serving without recognition (Matthew 6:1–4)
- Rejoicing in others’ honor rather than envying it (Romans 12:10)
- Taking the lower place willingly as the way of Christ (Luke 14:10)

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you most often catch yourself comparing or competing with others?
- What would becoming like a child look like in that specific area?
- What helps you serve gladly when no one notices or thanks you?

Question 3

Student Question:

Jesus issues a severe warning against causing one of “these little ones” to stumble (18:6–7). Why does God take so seriously the harm we can do to the faith of others, especially the young and the vulnerable?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus turns from the child as a model of humility to the child as an object of fierce protection. His words are among the most severe He ever spoke: whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Him to sin would be better off with a great millstone hung around his neck and drowned in the sea (v. 6). This is not exaggeration for effect; it is a window into how seriously God regards harm done to the faith of others.

Identify who the “little ones” are. Primarily they are believers, especially the young, the new, the vulnerable in faith, those easily influenced and easily wounded. Jesus links them to the child He has just set before them. To damage their faith, to lead them into sin, to be a stumbling block, is to do something God takes with terrible seriousness.

Help students feel the weight without missing the love beneath it. Jesus is fierce here precisely because He is tender toward the vulnerable. The same heart that welcomes the child rises in holy anger against anyone who would harm the child. God's severity here is the severity of protective love.

Apply it both ways. We must guard against being stumbling blocks, by our example, our influence, our careless words, the sin we model. And we are called to protect the vulnerable in our midst, the children, the new believers, the struggling, treating their faith as the precious, fragile thing it is.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The seriousness of causing a believer, especially the vulnerable, to stumble (18:6–7)
- God's protective love toward the "little ones" who believe in Christ
- The responsibility of our example and influence on others' faith (Romans 14:13)
- The duty to guard and nurture the faith of the young and new in Christ
- Divine severity as an expression of love for the vulnerable

Discussion Prompts

- Why does God treat harm to another's faith so severely?
- Who are the vulnerable "little ones" in your church and family that need protecting?
- How might your example be either a help or a stumbling block to others?

Question 4

Student Question:

Jesus speaks of cutting off whatever causes us to sin, however precious (18:8–9). What is one influence, habit, or relationship that is leading you toward sin, and what would decisive action against it look like?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

After warning against causing others to stumble, Jesus turns to the sin within us. He uses startling imagery: if your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off; if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out (vv. 8–9). Better to enter life maimed than to be thrown whole into hell.

Be clear that Jesus is not commanding literal self-mutilation, which would not solve the problem anyway, since sin comes from the heart. He is using vivid hyperbole to teach the seriousness with which we must deal with sin and the decisiveness it requires. Sin is not to be negotiated with or managed; it is to be cut off.

Help students apply the principle honestly. The "hand," "foot," or "eye" may stand for an influence, a habit, a relationship, an app, a source of temptation that keeps pulling them toward

sin, even something otherwise good or precious. Jesus says, deal with it decisively, even if it costs you.

Press for specifics and concrete action. What needs to be removed, blocked, ended, or fenced off? Half-measures rarely defeat sin. The radical language is meant to jolt us out of comfortable tolerance of the very things that endanger our souls. And remind them this severity flows from love: Jesus speaks this way because what is at stake is eternal.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The seriousness of personal sin and the eternal stakes involved (18:8-9)
- Decisive, radical action against the sources of temptation (Romans 13:14)
- Hyperbole that teaches urgency, not literal self-harm
- The reality of eternal judgment as motive for dealing with sin (Matthew 5:29-30)

Discussion Prompts

- What habit, influence, or relationship is currently pulling you toward sin?
- What would it look like to deal with it decisively rather than tolerate it?
- Why are half-measures usually not enough when fighting a besetting sin?

Question 5

Student Question:

In the parable of the lost sheep, the shepherd leaves the ninety-nine to seek the one that wandered (18:12-14). What does this reveal about the heart of God toward those who stray, and about the value He places on a single soul?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Now Jesus tells the parable of the lost sheep. A man with a hundred sheep discovers that one has wandered off. He leaves the ninety-nine on the hillside and goes in search of the one, and when he finds it, “he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray” (v. 13). The conclusion is the heart of it: “it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish” (v. 14).

Linger on the shepherd’s heart. He does not write off the one as an acceptable loss. He does not reason that ninety-nine out of a hundred is a fine result. The one matters enough to seek, and the finding brings joy. This is a window into the very heart of God.

Teach the value God places on a single soul. In a world that thinks in crowds and statistics, God thinks in persons. Every individual who wanders, the backslidden believer, the lost neighbor, the person everyone else has given up on, is the one the Shepherd goes after. The Father’s will is not the perishing of even one.

Connect this to the seeking mission of Christ Himself, who came to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10), and to the joy in heaven over one sinner who repents (Luke 15:7). This is not a God who waits passively for the lost to find their own way back. He goes after them. And He calls His people to share that seeking heart.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The seeking heart of God toward those who wander (18:12–13)
- The immense value God places on a single soul
- The Father's will that not one of the little ones should perish (18:14)
- Christ's mission to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10)
- Joy in heaven over one sinner who repents (Luke 15:7)

Discussion Prompts

- What does the shepherd's pursuit of the one reveal about God's heart?
- How does it change things to know God thinks in persons, not just crowds?
- Why is the finding of the one met with such joy?

Question 6

Student Question:

Jesus says it is not the Father's will that one of these little ones should perish. How does the Father's seeking heart challenge the way you think about people who have drifted from the Lord or never known Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes the Father's seeking heart and asks whether it has become ours. Jesus has just said the Father is not willing that one little one should perish. The question is whether we share that unwillingness, or whether we have quietly given up on people.

Help students see how easily we write people off. The relative who has drifted from the faith, the friend who fell away, the person whose lifestyle offends us, the one who has rejected our previous attempts. It is far easier to consign them mentally to the lost column than to keep seeking them.

Hold up the shepherd as the corrective. He does not calculate whether the one is worth the trouble; he goes. The Father's heart toward the straying is pursuit, not resignation. If we have stopped praying for someone, stopped hoping, stopped reaching out, the Shepherd's heart confronts our coldness.

Move toward concrete love. Ask students to bring to mind a specific person who has drifted or never known the Lord, and to consider one step of seeking: a prayer renewed, a relationship

rekindled, a conversation begun, a kindness shown. The Father seeks; He invites us to seek alongside Him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sharing the Father's seeking heart toward the lost and straying
- The danger of quietly writing people off as beyond reach
- Persevering prayer and pursuit for those who have wandered (Romans 10:1)
- The believer's call to participate in seeking the lost (2 Corinthians 5:18–20)

Discussion Prompts

- Who have you been tempted to give up on, and why?
- How does the Father's seeking heart challenge that?
- What is one concrete step of seeking you could take toward that person?

Question 7

Student Question:

Jesus assumes that when a brother sins, we will care enough to go to him, with the goal "you have gained your brother" (18:15). What does this teach about the kind of love that is willing to confront, and how does it differ from both harsh judgment and indifferent silence?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Jesus moves from the sheep that wandered to the brother who sins, and He assumes that genuine love will not stay silent. "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone" (v. 15). The aim is stated immediately: "If he listens to you, you have gained your brother." The whole process is about gaining, not condemning.

Draw out the kind of love this requires. It is far easier to do one of two wrong things: to gossip about the offender to everyone except him, or to say nothing at all and let the relationship quietly rot. Jesus rules out both. Love that is willing to go directly, privately, and humbly to a brother is harder and braver than either.

Distinguish this from harsh judgment on one side and indifferent silence on the other. The confrontation Jesus describes is not the eager fault-finding of a critic, nor the cold tolerance that does not care enough to act. It is the costly love that risks an awkward conversation because it longs to win the brother back.

Help students feel the goal. The point of going is restoration, not victory. We go privately first precisely to protect the brother, to keep the matter small, to give him every chance to respond without humiliation. This is love that seeks the other's good even at personal cost.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Love that is willing to confront for the sake of restoration (18:15)
- The goal of correction: to gain the brother, not to condemn him
- The difference between loving confrontation, harsh judgment, and indifferent silence
- Going privately first to protect the brother's dignity (Proverbs 25:9)
- Restoring a brother with a spirit of gentleness (Galatians 6:1)

Discussion Prompts

- Why is going directly to a brother harder than either gossip or silence?
- How does loving confrontation differ from harsh judgment?
- What makes restoration, rather than being proven right, the true goal?

Question 8

Student Question:

It is far easier to gossip about a struggling brother, or to say nothing at all, than to go to him in love. Which of those temptations is more yours, and what would faithful, gentle love require of you instead?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question names the two temptations Jesus rules out: gossip and silence. Most of us lean toward one or the other. Some of us talk about the offender to everyone but the offender; others avoid all conflict and simply pull away. Both feel easier than obedience.

Help students honestly identify their own pattern. The talker needs to see that sharing a brother's fault with others, however justified it feels, is not the love Jesus commands; it wounds rather than heals. The avoider needs to see that silence is not kindness; it abandons the brother to his sin and lets the relationship decay.

Then point to the harder, better way. Faithful love goes to the person, privately, humbly, prayerfully, seeking their restoration. It prepares its heart first, checks its own motives, and speaks the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). This is not natural to most of us; it must be chosen.

Encourage a concrete step. Is there someone they have been gossiping about who should be approached directly, or someone they have been avoiding whom love requires them to seek out? Urge them to go in the spirit of gentleness Jesus and Paul both describe, remembering their own need for grace.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Gossip and silence as two failures of love toward a sinning brother
- Speaking the truth in love as the better way (Ephesians 4:15)
- Examining our own hearts before correcting another (Matthew 7:3–5)
- Courage and gentleness held together in faithful confrontation

Discussion Prompts

- Are you more tempted to gossip about a struggling brother or to say nothing at all?
- What would faithful, gentle love require of you in a current situation?
- How can you prepare your own heart before going to someone?

Question 9

Student Question:

Read 18:15–20 carefully. Walk through the steps Jesus gives for dealing with a sinning brother, ending with the church and His words about binding and loosing and being gathered in His name. What is the purpose of this whole process, what is the nature of the authority Jesus gives the gathered church here, and how should we understand it (and guard against misusing it) in light of the rest of the New Testament?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest question of the lesson, so work through 18:15–20 step by step with the class. Jesus lays out a careful, escalating process, every stage of which is aimed at restoration. First, go privately, just you and your brother; if he listens, you have gained him (v. 15). Second, if he will not listen, take one or two others, so that every charge may be established by witnesses, and so he hears the appeal of more than one loving voice (v. 16). Third, if he still refuses, tell it to the church; and if he refuses even to listen to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector (v. 17), that is, treated as one outside the fellowship, in hope that this final, sober step will awaken him to repentance.

Underline the purpose at every stage. This is not a system for expelling the inconvenient or punishing the disliked. From the first private word to the last, the goal is to win the brother back. Even the final step, withdrawal, is redemptive in aim, meant to bring him to his senses and back to the fold, never to gloat or destroy (compare 1 Corinthians 5:5; 2 Corinthians 2:6–8, where the same person is later to be restored). The whole flock is involved because the whole flock loves the one.

Now address the words about binding and loosing: “whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (v. 18). The verb tenses point to the church acting in accord with what heaven has already determined; the church’s action ratifies on earth what God has revealed, rather than the church inventing or controlling heaven’s verdict. This is not a special priestly or clergy power to forgive sins or to issue new laws. It is the gathered church, acting under Christ’s revealed will in the gospel, recognizing and applying what God has already declared about sin and repentance. The authority is real, but it is derived and submissive, never autonomous.

Guard against the abuses on both sides. On one side, this passage has been misused to claim that church leaders hold the keys to heaven and dispense forgiveness by their own authority;

the New Testament knows nothing of such clergy power, for there is one mediator between God and men, Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 2:5). On the other side, many congregations simply ignore this text, tolerating unrepentant sin out of a false notion of tolerance, and so abandon the very brother they are called to seek. Faithfulness means neither lording it over others nor neglecting the loving discipline Christ commanded. The whole process is the church acting together, humbly, under the authority of Christ's word.

Finally, glory in the promise that crowns the passage: "where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them" (v. 20). This precious verse is given in the context of the church seeking a wandering brother. Christ promises His own presence among His people as they act in His name and according to His will. The authority of the gathered church is not the church's own; it is the authority of the Lord who is present in the midst of His people, guiding them by His revealed word. That is why it must always be exercised in humility, in love, and in submission to Scripture, with the recovery of the brother as its constant aim.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The Lord's process for addressing sin in the church, aimed throughout at restoration (18:15–17)
- Escalating, patient steps that protect the brother and seek to gain him
- Withdrawal as a redemptive measure meant to bring repentance, not destruction (1 Corinthians 5:5; 2 Corinthians 2:6–8)
- Binding and loosing as the church ratifying on earth what heaven has already declared, under Christ's revealed will (18:18)
- The rejection of any special clergy power to forgive sins or invent new laws; one mediator, Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 2:5)
- The danger of two opposite errors: lording authority over others, and neglecting loving discipline altogether
- The presence of Christ among His gathered people as the true ground of the church's authority (18:20)

Discussion Prompts

- Walk through the steps of 18:15–17. How does each one serve the goal of restoration?
- How should we understand "binding and loosing" so that it neither becomes a clergy power nor is ignored entirely?
- What does it mean that Christ Himself is present among His people as they act in His name?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over the whole passage, from childlike humility to the careful, loving pursuit of a wandering brother. Name one specific way Jesus is forming you, in humility, in mercy, or in love for the straying, this week.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Use this capstone to gather the whole passage and press it toward the heart. Matthew 18:1–20 has moved from childlike humility, to the protection of the vulnerable, to the seeking of the one who wandered, to the loving restoration of a sinning brother under the authority of the gathered church. Running through all of it is one heart: the humble, seeking, restoring love of Christ.

Help students see the unity of the passage. The same Lord who dethrones our pride is the One who treasures a single soul and gives His church a patient process for winning the fallen. Humility, mercy, and the brave love that pursues the straying all belong together. To grow in one is to grow in all.

Encourage specific, concrete response. A real answer might sound like: “I will stop competing for recognition at work and serve quietly,” or “I will reach out to the friend who drifted from the Lord,” or “I will go, gently and privately, to the brother I have only been talking about.” Vague resolutions fade by Tuesday.

Close with worship rather than mere resolve. The wonder of this chapter is that our Lord is Himself the humble One who became small for us, the Shepherd who left heaven to seek us when we were the wandering sheep, and the One present in the midst of His people. Lead your class to marvel at His seeking love, and to leave with one clear way they will let Him form them in humility, mercy, or pursuit of the lost this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The unity of humility, mercy, and restoring love in the life of the kingdom
- Christ as the humble One and the seeking Shepherd who pursued us first (Luke 19:10)
- Specific, concrete obedience as the fruit of genuine encounter with Christ
- Worship and gratitude flowing from the seeking love of the Lord

Discussion Prompts

- Which part of this passage, humility, mercy, or pursuing the straying, is God pressing on you most?
- What is one specific step you will take in response this week?
- How can this class pray for you as you take that step?