

The Gospel of Matthew

Lesson 21: Greatness and the Lost Sheep -- Matthew 18:1-20

The disciples come to Jesus with a question that exposes more about their hearts than they realize: "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" (v. 1). They are still thinking in the world's terms, jockeying for position, measuring rank, wondering who will sit where when the kingdom comes. And Jesus answers, as He so often does, not with a lecture but with a living illustration. He calls a little child, sets the child in the middle of them, and turns their whole question upside down.

"Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (v. 3). Not become like children to be great in the kingdom, but to enter it at all. Greatness in the kingdom is not climbing higher; it is becoming small. "Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (v. 4). The currency of the kingdom is not power but humility, not status but childlike dependence.

Then Jesus grows fierce, tender and fierce at once, over these "little ones." Whoever welcomes one such child welcomes Him; but whoever causes one of these little ones to stumble would be better off drowned in the depths of the sea (vv. 5-6). He speaks of cutting off whatever causes us to sin, of the angels of the little ones beholding the Father's face, and then He tells the unforgettable story: a shepherd with a hundred sheep leaves the ninety-nine to go after the one that wandered off, and rejoices over finding it. "So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish" (v. 14).

And what do we do when a brother or sister has wandered, not lost like a stray sheep but caught in sin? Jesus gives the church a careful, loving process: go and tell him his fault privately; if he will not listen, take one or two others; if he still refuses, tell it to the church. The goal from first to last is not punishment but restoration, to "gain your brother" (v. 15). And He closes with a stunning promise about the authority of the gathered church and His own presence: "where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them" (v. 20). Humility, mercy, the seeking of the lost, and the loving restoration of the fallen, this is the texture of life in the kingdom of Christ.

Group Discussion: The disciples wanted to know who would be the greatest, and Jesus put a child in front of them as the answer. Why do you think humility is so central to the kingdom of heaven, and why is it so hard for us, even as believers, to stop quietly measuring our own importance?

Personal Reflection: Jesus says the Father is not willing that even one little one should perish, and pictures a shepherd leaving the ninety-nine to seek the one. Who is the "one" in your life, a wandering believer or a lost soul, that God may be calling you to go after, and what has been holding you back?

Read Matthew 18:1–20

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?

7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Philippians 2:3–8, the mind of Christ who humbled Himself rather than grasping at status; Luke 15:3–7, the fuller telling of the parable of the lost sheep and heaven’s joy over one who repents; Galatians 6:1, restoring a brother caught in sin with a spirit of gentleness; James 5:19–20, turning a wanderer back and saving a soul from death; 1 Corinthians 5:1–5, the church acting together to address sin for the sinner’s ultimate good.