

Matthew 18:1-14

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[0 : 0 0] It's important to belong. We live in a society where I think increasingly many have very little sense of belonging, of being a valued and loved member of a community or even a family.

Anyway, in the passage that we've read from Matthew's Gospel in chapter 18, Jesus is posed a disappointing question by His disciples. Now, we thought about this question and part of the answer last Sunday morning, and we're going to continue thinking about how Jesus continues to answer that question, but just making memory. The disappointing question that was posed to Jesus was this, who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? We call it a disappointing question because as we were able to discover, it was a question rooted in pride and self-interest. The disciples were concerned as to establish who of them was the greatest, and as a result of that, who would enjoy most status and power and position in the messianic kingdom that they were sure Jesus would soon inaugurate. So, it was a disappointing question that those who had walked with Jesus and heard Him teach for so long would still have their minds set in this way. But Jesus sees the question, disappointing though it was as an opportunity to teach His disciples about His kingdom, His community, that all are invited to belong to the kingdom of heaven, as it is spoken of here in the passage, or the kingdom of God, that kingdom which is made up of all those who acknowledge and submit to the gracious rule of King Jesus. And in answering the question, Jesus begins by talking about what is involved in becoming a member of the kingdom of heaven. He speaks there in verse 3 of entering the kingdom, what is involved in entering the kingdom. Then He also speaks of what's involved in belonging to the kingdom. What is greatness for those who belong in the kingdom of heaven. And what we want to look at this morning is how He continues to answer the question. Last Sunday morning, we were only able to see part of the answer, but today we're going to continue looking at what Jesus says from verse 5 right through to verse 14. Now, there's a great deal there, but we're going to focus in a particular way that I hope allows us to draw out some of His answer in a way that's manageable in the time that we have available. And everything that

Jesus says in His answer revolves around those He describes as the little ones, these little ones. He'd already brought a child into the discussion or the conversation as a visual aid, and then He continues using this theme or picture of little ones. And this language recurs on a number of occasions in the passage. What we're going to do is in a moment try and work out, well, who are these little ones? When Jesus speaks about little ones, who is He speaking about? That's very fundamental to have a clear understanding of if we're going to understand everything else that Jesus says. So, we'll begin there in a moment.

But then we'll focus on two big issues that Jesus touches on in these verses. He touches on the issue of God's love for His little ones. And that is demonstrated in a number of ways in the few verses that we've read. But then also, and it follows on from this, Jesus touches on the matter of our responsibility towards God's little ones. Two big themes. But then there's a final thing that we need to look at that Jesus deals with very thoroughly or very vigorously. And that is a big problem that stands in the way of us fulfilling our responsibility as we ought, our responsibility towards God's little ones. There's a big problem, big obstacle, and Jesus deals with it. He tackles it head on. And we want to identify the problem, but also see what Jesus says about how we are to deal with that problem. We need to begin then by establishing who are the little ones that Jesus speaks of. We are concerned especially with verse 5 and what follows. And there we find in that verse the first mention of the little ones.

And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, and then Jesus goes on to say what he has to say. But particularly these little ones, who are they? Who does Jesus have in mind when he speaks of these little ones? Is Jesus talking about children? Is his concern here to establish how much God loves children and how important it is for us as the people of God to welcome children? But it is certainly true that God loves children, and it's certainly true that we are to welcome children. But is that who he is speaking of when he speaks of these little ones? He certainly has been talking about the need for citizens of the kingdom of heaven to be like children. But the actual identity of those he describes as little children becomes clear by what Jesus himself says concerning those he is speaking about there in verse 6 when he says, but if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me.

[6 : 34] So there he's giving us some information. He's giving us a clue as to who he's speaking about. He's speaking about those who believe in him. These little ones who believe in me.

The little children that Jesus is speaking about are the disciples of Jesus. Disciples who are weak and insignificant and whose calling is not to be served but to serve. Now these little children will certainly include children will certainly include children but is not limited to children.

I think it's also clear from what follows that Jesus when he speaks of these little ones, though I would argue it includes all of his disciples, he does have particularly in mind those disciples who are fragile and vulnerable. That would include those who are new in the faith, or who are vulnerable for any number of reasons that aren't specified. So these are the little ones that Jesus is speaking about. Those who believe in him. Disciples who have become like children, that they might enter the kingdom and that they might live and belong in the kingdom as they ought.

And very especially those who are weak and vulnerable and struggling, which in a measure describes all of us. So having identified who these little ones are, let's notice these two big themes that I think we can draw out from what Jesus says. And that's the manner in which we're going to be dealing with the passage this morning. Not going through it word by word. It's far too big a passage to do that. But to draw out the big themes. And the first big theme, it seems to me, is this. God's love for his little ones.

That's a great place to start, to ponder on and to consider, to marvel at God's great love for his little ones, for the weak and fragile and vulnerable. And I want to highlight three ways in which God's love, God's love for his deep, intense love for his little ones is revealed or expressed in what he says.

[9 : 00] The first way that we can detect God's great love for his little ones is in the severe warnings that are directed to those who would harm them. They had in verse 6, having spoken of a little child, he then says, 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. Jesus directs this very severe warning. And sometimes we're so focused on the warning and the severity of it that we lose sight of why he warns in this way. Why is it that such a severe warning is directed to the disciples? He's speaking to the disciples. He's speaking to us. Why such a severe warning? Well, because of his great love. He loves these little ones to such a degree that causing them to sin or to stumble is a grave offense and has grave consequences. This warning and the gravity of it is grounded in God's love for those he is speaking about, these little ones. And when we think about what this involves, and we'll come back to this, but let me just give one example of how we might cause these little ones to stumble. I think sometimes we think we're off the hook in regards to this warning because we imagine that it's speaking about gross sin in which we might be involved or guilty of in relation to children, but that's not what Jesus is saying at all. He's certainly not limiting it to that. Anything that causes little ones to stumble or to sin. Let me just give you one example of how we could be guilty of that.

We think of the young in the faith. Jesus goes on to speak about, or rather in verse 5, he's spoken about welcoming, and that does suggest, you know, those who are older in the faith welcoming those who are young in the faith. Well, let's think of those who are young in the faith as they become part of the kingdom of heaven, as they become part of a church made up of disciples of Jesus Christ.

What do they do, these young Christians? Well, they look to those who are older in the faith as their model, as their example. They might say, well, I wish they didn't, but they do. And what do they see? What do they hear? What do they hear in terms of our conversation when we go downstairs and have a cup of coffee or tea and they're part of the group as we're chatting away?

Do they hear words seasoned with grace or with gossip? Do they hear us demonstrating how cynical we are, how filled of cynicism and sarcasm or hope and joy? You see, depending on what they hear, then we might be causing them to stumble. They'll say, well, that's what Christians are like. That's what I should be like. And we cause them to stumble. Nothing scandalous and yet causing to stumble, these little ones. We'll come back to this. My concern at the moment is simply to establish God's great love for His little ones. And this is the first way it's demonstrated, the very severe warning directed to those who would harm them. But secondly, in terms of God's love for His little ones, it's revealed in His special and permanent care for His little ones.

And that takes us to the parable in verse 10 particularly. There we read, see that you do not look down on one of these little ones. Again, the same people that Jesus is speaking about. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven. This is a very intriguing verse and we touched on the matter of angels helping us as we spoke to the children and made reference to not this verse but to a verse in Hebrews.

[13 : 13] But however we understand what is said here, what it certainly speaks of is of God's remarkable and loving provision for those He cares for and loves. God deploys the angels to care for His little ones.

Now some have drawn from this verse, you might say understandably, the idea that we're all allocated a guardian angel. There's this possessive pronoun. I tell you that they're angels in heaven and so it's understandable some might draw from that this idea. I don't think that that is what Jesus is saying but what is true as we were commenting on as we made reference to the verse in Hebrews chapter 1. Angels are ministering spirits. They are those that God uses to help His people. And these angels, spoken of in the answer that Jesus gives to His disciples, these angels in some way that is not altogether explained, serve as our heavenly representatives before God and ensure that we are ever before

God permanently. You as a child of God. You never escape from His notice or loving concern. This is the second way in which Jesus makes clear just how great is God's love for these little ones or His little ones.

But then thirdly, at the end of the parable, you have another way in which God's love is demonstrated or spoken of. And it concerns His gracious and keeping purpose towards us. In verse 14, having shared the parable, He draws out the conclusion in the same way, in the same way that the shepherd looks out for the one lost sheep, in the same way that the Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.

Why is that? Why is the Father not willing that any of these little ones be lost? Well, because He loves them. It is because of His great love that God is not willing.

[15 : 49] And if God is not willing, it ain't going to happen that one of these little ones be lost. God loves His little ones. If you have become like a little child and placed your trust in Jesus, then here are some ways or some evidence of just how much God loves you.

This is one theme that recurs throughout what Jesus is saying, God's love for His little ones. But what follows on from that is another big theme, and that is our responsibility towards God's little ones.

We are to love as God loves. We are to love each other. We are all little ones. But we are to be especially careful to love and care for those believers who are young or weak or vulnerable or struggling in some way or another.

And I think it's clear that the onus lies more heavily on the older and more mature in the faith. Those who are to do the welcoming, in verse 5.

And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. Now, given how we've explained the meaning of little ones, then there is a sense in which the one who welcomes and the one who is welcomed are part of that same body of believers who are described as little ones.

[17 : 26] And yet there is, of course, this particular onus on the more mature to receive and to welcome and to care for those who are young and weak and vulnerable.

How does this love find practical expression? Well, I think in what Jesus says, we can identify two key ways in which this love that we have to show towards God's little ones finds practical expression.

First of all, we welcome the weak, but then also we walk with the wandering. Let's think of these two ways. They're very related. But we are to welcome the weak. That's how verse 5 begins.

And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me. What does that look like? This call to welcome a little child in the name of Jesus.

This is more than just being friendly, though it certainly includes being friendly. It's good to be friendly. A friendly welcome is a good thing. And so that is included, I'm sure.

[18 : 38] But it goes beyond being friendly. To welcome is to receive in the fullest sense of that word. It implies a sacrificial commitment to help and accompany and counsel the one who is being welcomed.

This is about bringing the new or the weak believer into the heart of the community and surrounding such with love and protection. And we welcome them not because of what they can contribute, be it to ourselves or the church that we belong to.

But we welcome them simply because they are God's little ones and loved by Him. And that is reason enough. Our criteria isn't what are we going to get out of this.

What is the congregation going to get out of this new person who has come? That's not on the radar or ought not to be on the radar.

Simply the fact that they are loved by God is reason enough for us to welcome them in the way that we are instructed to do.

[19 : 49] That said, our welcome is not without its own reward, a very special reward. Jesus says that in welcoming God's little ones, we are welcoming Jesus Himself.

And I don't think that means that it's as if we were welcoming Jesus. No, in a very real sense, though perhaps somewhat mysterious sense, we are welcoming Jesus Himself.

They are those who believe in Him. They are united to Christ. They are part of His body. When we welcome them, we welcome Him. We welcome the weak.

But also we are to walk with the wandering. Verses 11 through to 13, the parable speaks of those little ones who are wandering.

We have, of course, the same picture used by Jesus on another occasion where the focus is very much on bringing somebody in who is lost. Here the picture isn't so much of one who is lost, but one who is wandering.

[20 : 53] Part of the flock, but wandering from the flock. And the call is to be like the shepherd in the parable, to pursue the one who is wandering, to graciously pursue and bring back into the fold.

The cause of the wandering is not identified. It's a parable. It's not intended to go into that level of detail. It may be that those who wander are victims of those who have caused them to stumble, that Jesus has spoken of already.

It may be that their wandering is self-inflicted. But no matter the cause, we are to lovingly pursue them. I think the apostle Paul is picking up on part of this duty in what he says to the believers in Galatia.

In chapter 6 and in verse 1, he says, Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. Very especially that language.

You who are spiritual, you who are older in the faith, who are more mature, what are you to do? Point the finger? No, you are to restore him gently. We are to walk with the wandering.

[22 : 11] Welcome the weak and walk with the wandering. Now, when we think of ourselves, a congregation like ourselves, Bon Accord, this level of care that Jesus is counseling and requiring of his people, it won't just happen.

Now, those in leadership, those who are, to use the language of Paul, all those who are spiritual or mature, have a particular responsibility. But this is a duty that falls upon all of us as little children, looking out for other little children.

It requires, in the first instance, love. In the absence of love, this simply won't happen. Love is fundamental. But I think accompanying love, there needs to be a level of organization.

We need to ensure that all are being looked out for. How easy it is for somebody to be wondering and for us to be oblivious to that fact. And in order to be aware, to be conscious of that happening, love needs to be accompanied by some level of organization.

One of the reasons why we have neighborhood fellowships is to, in some measure, provide that level of organization, where instead of having one large group, you have smaller groups, where it's easier to be aware of where people are and what their struggles are, and to do what is required, to walk with the wandering.

[23 : 40] You can't walk with all of the wandering, but there's maybe one who you can walk with. You can't welcome all of the weak, but there's maybe one that you can welcome in a particular way.

Our responsibility towards God's little ones. Two great themes then, here in the answer that Jesus gives to the question that the disciples have posed.

The love of God for His little ones, and our responsibility to care for His little ones. But there's a problem, a big problem.

You see, if we left things there, we might say, well, that sounds wonderful. Love by God and loving one another. But so often, it doesn't happen.

Now, this is nothing new. It's not something peculiar to any one dysfunctional congregation, be it this congregation or any other congregation. What is the problem?

[24 : 41] Why is it that so often what Jesus is calling us to do as a community, as those who are part of His kingdom, why is it that so often it doesn't happen?

Well, Jesus identifies the problem very clearly, and the problem is sin. My sin and your sin. In a number of ways, Jesus makes it clear that this is what stands in the way of His little ones being loved and cared for as they ought to be.

He begins, or at least the part of the passage that we are looking at, begins by speaking of this reality of His little ones being caused to sin or to stumble.

The word here that is translated, caused to sin, can have that broader idea of causing to stumble. We, you and me, cause others to stumble.

By our failure to welcome them as we ought. By our careless and unkind words. By words said and words unsaid. By our hypocrisy in our living out of the Christian life.

[25 : 50] By our selfishness in regard to our time and our resources. In all of these ways, we cause others to stumble. By our unwillingness to get involved with those who are different or demanding or difficult.

And we cross over to the other side of the road, as it were, because it's just too messy and difficult and draining. We cause others to stumble. We provoke others to wander.

It's very similar, perhaps. And the way in which we provoke others to wander by those same sins that we've just mentioned, and no doubt others.

We're unwilling to gently pursue those who do wander. We'd rather just stay with the 99. What's the big deal? It's just one. It's just one.

One wandering soul. It's not the end of the world. Or so we think, even if we don't verbalize that sentiment. And of course, we wander ourselves. We too wander from the path that God has set for us.

[27 : 00] In all of this, we sin. Sin is the problem. And sin is serious. What do we need to do? Well, Jesus tells us in verses 7 to 9, this very rigorous, severe language that Jesus employs.

Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin. Such things must come. We live in a sin-sick world. These things will happen. But woe to the man through whom they come.

And that's you and me. It's not some ogre out there who's guilty of that. No, it's you and me. And what are we to do with that sin which causes others to stumble?

That means that we don't welcome as we ought. That we don't restore gently as we ought. What are we to do with that sin? Well, here Jesus uses this very brutal language.

If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. And then he says the same concerning your eye if it causes you to sin. Now, it's very clear that Jesus is not advocating a self-mutilation.

[28 : 13] I think it's clear at so many levels. But what strikes me as being a particularly evidence that it's not intended to be literally followed is the idea of if your eye causes you to sin.

I don't know about you, but I don't know how just one eye can do something. It's always both. So the idea that getting rid of one would be sufficient is just literally, it just wouldn't make any sense.

So this isn't clearly Jesus advocating such violence to our own bodies. But what Jesus is doing is in a deliberately shocking, we might even say offensive manner, He is stressing the need to deal with sin in a rigorous and radical way.

We need to engage in spiritual surgery. We need to identify sin. We need to repent of sin. We need to flee from sin. We need to rid our lives of sin.

The sin that harms ourselves and others and damages the fellowship. What Jesus is commending to His disciples, to you and me, is that we deal radically with our sin.

[29 : 29] The mortification of sin, to use an old-fashioned word, to kill sin in our lives will be difficult and painful. The picture language used, though picture language, makes clear that this is a painful process.

But better by far to engage in this painful process than to be thrown into the fire of hell. Now take note that Jesus is not saying that any of us who are His disciples, and Jesus is speaking to His disciples, are in danger of being thrown into the fire of hell.

What He is doing is stressing the need to treat our sin with the utmost gravity, and does so by drawing this vivid contrast for the purpose of emphasizing how important it is to deal with our sin.

Jesus' purpose is to wake us up from our careless and sinful slumber and to shake us into action. And He's speaking to you and He's speaking to me.

If we don't deal with sin, if you don't deal with your sin, God's little ones will not be loved and cared for as God intends.

[30 : 49] Sin will get in the way. Sin will get in the way.

How sad it is when sin gets in the way. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we come to you and we come acknowledging not only that we are sinners, but that we sin in this very particular way.

We cause others to stumble by our carelessness, by our selfishness, by our lack of love, and in so many other ways.

Help us, each of us, to examine our own lives and hearts and circumstances, to identify the ways in which we are guilty of causing others to sin or to stumble.

And as we do, that we would take seriously the need to deal radically with that sin. We thank you for the great answer to sin that you have provided for us, for the great forgiveness of sin that is ever available for those who come seeking forgiveness.

[32 : 20] And we pray that we would accompany our asking for and receiving your forgiveness with that deliberate and permanent concern to so discipline our lives and so flee from sin that it would not prove to be the great obstacle that it so often is in living as citizens of the kingdom of heaven, in loving others as you love us.

And these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.