

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The Childlikeness of Believers, Part 1

Scripture: Matthew 18:1-10

Code: 90-346

Tonight I want you to turn in your Bible to the eighteenth chapter of the gospel of Matthew...Matthew chapter 18. This is a chapter that has very many familiar statements. In fact, maybe it is an assembly of familiar statements that is beyond any other such assembly in terms of the number of things that are familiar to us. Let me just show you what I mean.

Notice verse 3, "Unless you are converted and become like children, you shall not enter the Kingdom of heaven." A familiar statement. Or verse 6, "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believes in Me to stumble, it is better for him that a heavy millstone be hung around his neck and that he be drowned in the depths of the sea." Or verse 8, "If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you, it's better for you to enter into life crippled or lame than having two hands or two feet to be cast into the eternal fire." Or verse 9, "If your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out, throw it from you, it's better for you to enter life with one eye than having two eyes to be cast into the fiery hell."

Or verse 10, "See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven continually behold the face of My Father who is in heaven." Or verse 12, "What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, doesn't he leave the 99 on the mountains and go and search for the one that is straying?" And verse 13, "If it turns out that he finds it, truly I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the 99 which have not gone astray." Or perhaps verse 15, "If your brother sins, go and reprove him in private. If he listens to you, you've won your brother." Or perhaps verse 16, "And if he doesn't listen, take one or two more with you so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses, every fact may be confirmed."

Or perhaps verse 18, "Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Or perhaps verse 19, "Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by My Father who is in heaven." Or perhaps verse 20, "For where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in the midst." Or perhaps verse 22, "Jesus said to him, 'I do not say to you...referring to forgiveness...up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.'"

Those are all somewhat familiar statements. In fact, it may be a surprise to you because so many of them have become axiomatic in the Christian world, it may surprise you that they all come from the same chapter. And in spite of the fact that this chapter is loaded with these familiar statements, these

statements which are almost proverbial in the language of evangelicalism, in spite of that, this chapter is one of THE most ignored chapters in all the gospels. I believe the eighteenth chapter of Matthew is one of the great discourses that our Lord gave, that it is one great speech, one great doctrinal lesson. It has long been hacked into bits and pieces which is how we pretty much pick up these proverbial statements with which we are familiar. They all come out of the same text and therefore they all come from the same context. And there is clearly a unifying theme in this chapter and once you grasp the unifying theme of this chapter, this chapter becomes alive and all of the bits and pieces with which we are familiar, come together in one whole so that they can be rightly and fully understood.

It is characteristic of the gospel of Matthew to record great sermons by our Lord. That is not to say that when Matthew records a sermon, he records every single word our Lord said, nor is it to assume that He only preached these sermons once because much of what our Lord says He repeated day after day, week after week, month after month and year after year in His ministry. But nonetheless, what Matthew does give us is summaries of His great sermons. And we are familiar with some of them. In Matthew 5 through 7 we have the famous Sermon on the Mount, taking up all three of those chapters...a very, very important message from our Lord, the foundational message to move people from a system of works/righteousness to true salvation, monumental...the Sermon on the Mount.

In chapter 10, Matthew has a remarkable record of a sermon on discipleship, what it really means to be a true disciple of Jesus Christ, that flows through the tenth chapter. In the thirteenth chapter of Matthew, you have another remarkable sermon made up of a series of parables which define the nature of the present age. This is a definition of the character of the present age and what the Kingdom will look like in this present age which is designed to enable us to understand our times and to be effective in evangelism and the work of ministry. It is a sermon on the nature of the Kingdom in this age.

Then in chapter 23 you have our Lord's sermon against false religious leaders directed at scribes and the Pharisees, the apostate leaders of Israel. You have another very familiar sermon with which we are currently dealing on Sunday morning and that is called The Olivet Discourse, the sermon our Lord gave on the Mount of Olives that occupies Matthew 24 and 25.

So there are five notable sermons. They are pretty much generally viewed that way. But in my recollection, I cannot recall any list of those sermons which stretches to include chapter 18. It is as if everyone has sort of acquiesced to the bits and pieces approach that we are familiar with from this chapter which somehow leaves us short of really understanding this chapter.

The best way to title this chapter and this will reveal its theme is "The Childlikeness of the Believer," or "The Childlikeness of Believers." It introduces us to life in the church among the children of God, life in the Kingdom among the children of God. To get even down more basic, this is the first instruction the Lord gave regarding the church. The first time He mentions the church is in Matthew

16, "I will build My church." The church is yet future, to be established officially on the Day of Pentecost with the arrival of the Holy Spirit. Here in this chapter is the first instruction for the church. The first time the word "church" appears in the New Testament appears in chapter 16, "I will build My church," the second time it appears in the New Testament it appears in chapter 18, "Tell it to the church." This is instruction to believers in the church. It tells us how to conduct our relationships with one another. Before the church gets to the Great Commission, before the church takes on its responsibility to evangelize the world, before the church embraces its duty to proclaim the gospel to the ends of the earth, the church has to be what the Lord designed it to be. The platform of genuine spiritual life provides credibility for our message.

As one philosopher considering Christianity put it, "Show me your redeemed lives and I might be inclined to believe in your Redeemer." I suppose another way to look at that would be, "Don't tell me you've met the great physician if you're still sick. I'm unconvinced." "If indeed you have met the Redeemer who has transformed you, then let me see the transformation." The most important thing the church does is be the church that our Lord wants it to be, and that is why instruction on the life of the church comes first and instruction on the mission of the church comes later. All that we do in the life of the church in terms of edification and instruction is with a view to the church being what the church must be so that it can then do what it must do and be believable.

It's almost a joke because it's so frequently said by those outside the church that the church does not impress them because it is full of hypocrites. What is that? People who profess something they don't live. They claim to be something that they are not manifestly demonstrating. The Lord then in the initial instruction to the church talks about our relationships with each other in the church and it's all here in this chapter in a dynamic and unforgettable way. And it has to bear heavily upon our hearts in a foundational sense.

You would obviously agree that whatever it is that the Lord said first to the church is its initial priority because it is His initial concern. So we're not talking about something down the list, not something peripheral but something essential, germane, foundational to the establishing to the life of the church in a way that it manifests the power of God, the transforming grace of God through Christ. In fact, chapter 17 ends with the children of God and their responsibility to the world. It's a little section about taxes, responsibility to the government. And then immediately moving in to chapter 18 it is the children of God and their responsibility in the Kingdom of God. In fact, this chapter forms the foundation for all other chapters in the New Testament that discuss believers relationships to each other. It all begins right here. This is the foundation for all relational portions of the epistles of the New Testament. It is a very, very important strategic chapter.

Now as we come into it, it doesn't take long for us to get the picture. Let's look at verse 1. "At that time the disciples came to Jesus saying, 'Who then is greatest in the Kingdom of heaven?'" Now the disciples had a problem with this, didn't they? This is their incessant conversation. And for every

time it appears through the flow of the ministry of Jesus Christ, for every time it is indicated in the text, it probably was a matter of discussion hundreds of other times. It was, in fact, a preoccupation of theirs. They were having another one of their familiar heated discussions about who was going to be greatest in the Kingdom. You can parallel this text in Luke 9 verse 46 and following. You can parallel this text in Mark 9 verses 33 and 34. Neither Mark nor Luke nor John, for that matter, have the full text of this chapter. But they do make reference to this constant discussion about who is to be greatest. Who is the greater, meizon? Who has the highest ranking? Who is the chief? Who is the superior?

So we can see that even though they were believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, they had ever-present problems with pride, self-seeking ambition, desire for prominence, and it is not new. You see it in chapter 16, you see it again in chapter 20. You even see the same discussion the night before Jesus is crucified, right down to the last day before the cross they are still having this debate about which of them will receive preeminence in the Kingdom.

But the argument has now been fueled by a new reality. I suppose prior to this time it seemed defacto that Peter would be the primary one, right? He would be by virtue of his dominating personality, the strength of his leadership, the fact that he was the verbalizer of everything thought out and not thought out, we understand that Peter was a dominating force and they may have sort of deferred to the very fact that Peter was the proverbial elephant in the room, crowding at everybody. But Jesus had said something very strong to Peter. In fact, Jesus had said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan." That seems to open the door for somebody else to grab the top spot. That's like a serious disqualification to be called Satan by Jesus. That can't contribute to your priority place in the Kingdom.

So there's a new energy in the discussion because of what has been said to Peter. And they're very energized. They want to be in the Kingdom, they want the Kingdom as they defined it from the Old Testament, the Kingdom and glory that all the prophets had spoken of, they wanted that Kingdom to come. They knew Jesus was the Messiah. They wanted Him to bring it and they wanted prominence in it. In fact, they wanted to be the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Now this is the perfect demonstration of pride. There couldn't be a better one. You can't go any higher than wanting to be the greatest, the most prominent, the most honored, the most exalted one. And so, it's a perfect time for the Lord to take them down and take them down hard. And He does. Verse 2, "He called a child to Himself and set him before them."

This is a paidion. Mark says that He took him up in His arms. So this is a little child, one to be held in one's arms. Mark uses the word that means to be embraced. Here is an infant. Here is a toddler. We don't know exactly. Jesus picks this little child up and embraces him in His arms. Just to help you understand what is going on here, the other gospels indicate that He is in Capernaum. In fact,

He is noted to be in Capernaum back in chapter 17 and verse 24. And here we find that the other gospels tell us He is in a house, it very well could be Peter's house for Peter plays a main role in the prior passage. This might be Peter's house. There are many who think it well could be. This then might be a child of the family of Peter. The little baby then becomes His object lesson. The little baby becomes the visible focal point of this monumental lesson that our Lord will give. This little baby in His arms is a picture of the believer in the Kingdom family. And to deal with disruptive pride and to deal with ambition and the love of prominence, our Lord teaches them on the childlikeness of the believer. And this is all designed to change the total perspective from competition and elevation to service and humiliation. This is really, in a sense, a lesson on humility, designed to humble them and to humble us.

Now as we approach this chapter and we'll do this for a couple of Sunday nights, I'm going to give you the big picture so we're not going to crawl through this, we're going to rather than get the worm's eye, a little bit more of the bird's eye view. What our Lord lays out are several important points. First, we all enter the Kingdom like children. We are to receive one another like children. We are to care for one another like children. We are to respect one another like children. We are to discipline one another like children. And we are to forgive one another like children. This is all about how we function in the family of God as children.

And by the way, I don't need to go into this in detail. It should be familiar to you already that the most common designation of believers in the New Testament is as children...children. Let's begin in verses 3 and 4, we all enter the Kingdom like children.

“He said then...holding that little child in His arms...truly I say to you, unless you're converted and become like children, you shall not enter the Kingdom of heaven. Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.” That is a very, very strong opening statement. It goes without saying that they knew they were having a debate about prominence that was fed by pride. Obviously. There was no getting around it that the verbal battle and a growing animosity and the competitiveness that existed between them was a manifestation of their proud hearts and their personal selfish desire. And our Lord says to them, “I'm saying something serious to you. Truly I say to you, unless you are converted, unless you turn around and demonstrate that you're going to go in another direction, you're not even going to be in My Kingdom. You're worried about who's going to be great and I'm telling you with that kind of an attitude you're not even going to be in the Kingdom.” This is a shattering opening statement.

You're worried about greatness and glory. You're worried about prominence. That's going to potentially exclude you from the Kingdom. He reminds them of the basic salvation attitude, in a word...humility. Humility demonstrated, one, in the recognition of your own sinfulness. Humility, two, demonstrated in the recognition of your own unworthiness, lack of accomplishment, lack of achievement. Humility, number three, demonstrated in the fact that you cannot do anything to earn

entrance into the Kingdom. He is reiterating what He said in the Sermon on the Mount about being meek, the meek are the ones who inherit the earth in the Kingdom sense, the meek who mourn over their sin, who are broken over their sin, who know they are bankrupt and destitute spiritually and hunger and thirst after a righteousness they do not have and cannot earn.

So He says, I'm telling you something truly, which is the way you introduce a very serious statement, unless you are converted, unless you turn and go the other way, unless you stop going in the direction of pride and self-glory and move in the direction of humility, you're not even going to be in My Kingdom. In fact, you have to become like children.

What do you mean? Verse 4, "Whoever then humbles himself as this child," *top haidia*(???) , little child. You have to humble yourself like a little child if you want to be greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. And here He answers their dilemma. "Who is greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven? Those who humble themselves. All those who humble themselves are equally the greatest in the Kingdom. First of all, all those who humble themselves are the only ones who are in the Kingdom.

The humility of a child, what do we mean by that? Well, children are humble. What do we mean when we say they're humble? They have no achievements. They have no accomplishments. They have no personal means to achieve or to accomplish. We're talking about infants, little ones. They have no ability to chart their own course, they have no wisdom to face the world. They have no ability to protect themselves, to provide for themselves. They are weak. They are dependent. They are immature. They are ignorant. They are simple minded. They are vulnerable. They are in desperate need of care and that's exactly how it is for those who enter the Kingdom. We recognize that we have no achievement, no merit, no accomplishment. We are weak, ignorant, dependent, immature, ignorant, simple-minded, vulnerable. We can't defend ourselves. We can't achieve anything by some accomplishment. We have no ability for those kinds of things. We have no credentials. We have nothing to offer. A baby has no personal worth or glory, having accomplished nothing. That's what you have to be like or you won't even enter My Kingdom.

What do we mean by Kingdom? Let's look at that for a moment, the Kingdom of Heaven mentioned twice, one in verse 3 and one in verse 4, and all over the gospel of Matthew, I might add. Simply here it means the sphere of God's rule over the saved. The sphere of God's rule over the redeemed. The realm of salvation entered by grace through faith, the dominion where God rules over His own redeemed people. It is synonymous with being a believer. It is synonymous with eternal life. It is synonymous with salvation.

And if you are to possess salvation to enter into the sphere where God rules over His redeemed people, two elements are mentioned. "Except you be turned...except you are converted," it's the word turned, it means from pride, arrogance, and the illusion that you're some worthy person, you must turn. This is just another definition of repentance. You must turn and become as little children. On

the one hand you abandon pride, on the other, you embrace humility. Becoming as little children, becoming humble, humbling himself, as verse 4 says, tapeinoo, is to lower yourself. And Jesus has this living demonstration in His arms. So we enter the Kingdom like children. I don't need to say more about that, you're familiar with that.

Now, what I want you to read and look carefully at the text is as we come to the next point. In the Kingdom we continue to be children. We are designated as children all throughout the gospels and all throughout the New Testament, even John writing very late in the first century identifies the readers in the church as children. We will always be the children of God in His Kingdom. We are in His family as children. We came in as children, we remain children. We need to be provided for. We need to be protected. We need to be given instruction. We need to be given wisdom. We still don't have anything in terms of our own to hold on to our salvation, to achieve great things for God, it is all His work through our availability.

So we will always be children. We enter as children. Second point, we are to treat each other like children. We are to treat each other like children. This is the basic call of our Lord for us to define our mutual relationships in the church as the kind of tenderness that is given to helpless children. Verse 5, "Whoever receives one such child in My name, or because that child is Mine, bears My name, receives Me."

There could not be a more dramatic way to identify our relationships in the body of Christ. To receive is dechomai, like a guest, to welcome with kindness and sympathy. One such little child...we're not talking about actual little babies, we're not talking about actual infants, we're talking about believers, Christians, in My name, because they bear My name, because they belong to Me. Takes this out of the category as physical children and into the category as spiritual children. When you welcome, when you embrace with kindness and love and affection any other child who bears the name of Christ, He says, you receive Me.

I think we understand a little about this in the world. I have children and I can say to you unequivocally that my heart is so profoundly attached to my children even in a human sense and then in a spiritual sense as brothers and sisters in Christ, that how you treat my earthly children has a profound effect on me because I am inseparable from my children. You cannot mistreat my children without mistreating me. You know that as a parent, that's the picture here. And it's even more graphic, more marvelous, more extensive when you realize that the way you treat another believer is the way you treat Christ.

The Old Testament says that the people of God are the apple of His eye. I suppose people think that means an apple you hold out here and look at. It doesn't mean that. It means your pupil. When God says My people are the apple of My eye, He means that when you mistreat His people it's like sticking your finger in His eye. That is an irritating thing to do. You don't want to stick your finger in

anybody's eye. There's really nothing more painful and irritating than that. Nor do you want to mistreat any of those whom God views as the pupil of His own eye.

Do you remember the Apostle Paul on the Damascus Road in Acts 9? He is confronted by the Lord in a glorious confrontation, he is struck blind and what does Jesus say to Paul, then named Saul? "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Christians?" Is that what He said? No. "Why are you persecuting Me?" He is inseparable from His own children. How you treat other believers is how you treat the Lord who lives in other believers. Paul says in Galatians 2:20, "I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, yet not I but Christ lives in me." As I said before, I am inseparable from Christ, for me to live is Christ. I don't know where He ends and I begin, or where He begins and I end. But how marvelous that it works two ways. If you say things that dishonor Christ, I feel the pain. If you say things and do things that dishonor me, He feels the pain.

It's a serious thing to strike any child in any way that belongs to Christ. But on a positive note, we're still there, on a positive note in verse 5, how you receive one such child who bears My name, is how you receive Me. Love My children and you will have My love in return. Mistreat My children, and you will forfeit that love to some degree.

So, how we treat each other is how we treat Christ. This is a stunning and critical foundational element in all relationships in the church. He who is joined to the Lord is one spirit, 1 Corinthians 6:17. We are as believers inseparable from Christ. If you join yourself to a harlot, Paul says, you join Christ to that harlot. Every believer is the temple of the Spirit of God. Christ comes to you in every believer. How you treat that believer is how you treat Christ. That's the foundation principle for relations in the church.

That leads to a third emphasis here and a very important one that comes off of that, a negative one at that. We enter like children, we treat each other like children, beloved by the Lord. And then, thirdly, we protect each other like children. This gets very serious, verse 6. "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it is better for him that a heavy millstone be hung around his neck and he be drowned in the depths of the sea."

Humph. Pretty serious, huh? Every believer is Christ to us. How we treat every other believer is how we are treating Christ. The implications are that if you cause one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, you'd be better off to die a horrible death by drowning. It's not talking about children physically, it's talking about children spiritually. It says it. One of these little ones who believe in Me. That cannot be true of infants, babies, small children. These are people of faith. These are believers who are identified as children. Before you ever offend another believer, you would be better off dead. And you'd be better off dying a horrible death.

Now, this is basic instruction for the church. I suppose we could pin this on the wall outside, "Welcome to Grace Community Church. We're glad to have you and whichever one of you causes one believer to stumble, you'd be better off drowned." Ah, that might start a conversation or two. I think the media might come out and take some pictures of that plaque on the outside. Or I suppose we could put it on the Grace Today and pass it out every Sunday. "Be careful how you treat us, we here are the children of God, how you treat us is how you treat Christ. And if you cause us to stumble, you'd be better off drowned." Not exactly seeker friendly.

It's reminiscent of Acts chapter 5 where God killed Ananias and Sapphira because of their hypocrisy and they literally were struck dead in front of the whole church. And it says later, "None dare join himself to them." Well of course, people in town said don't go to that place, people die in there. They're struck dead.

How serious is holiness? How serious is the responsibility that we have to lead each other away from sin? It is an enormous crime to lead another believer into sin. It is an enormous crime. You would be better to endure a painful, horrible, unthinkable death than the discipline of God when you have offended one little one.

By the way, a millstone is a large grinding stone, mulos onikos, pulled around by a mule to grind grain. And this, by the way, was a Roman form of capital punishment...a massive millstone around the neck and down to the bottom you go.

Just exactly how would you do that? How would you cause one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble? I think it's pretty important to answer that question, don't you? I mean, if we'd be better off dead than doing it, we would like to know then how not to do it. Let me give you some things to think about.

Number one, you could do it by direct temptation. You could cause one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble...obviously the word stumble means to fall. It means to be tripped up, stumbling into sin is the whole point. You can do it by direct temptation. You can lead a person into sin by commiserating with them in what you say...gossip, evil talk, unkind words. You can cause them to buy into your lie. You could lead a person to cheat. You could lead a person to shirk their spiritual duty, to sin sexually. There are so many ways. Any direct solicitation, a husband could lead his wife to sin to get her to sign a lie, maybe on a tax document, or some other official or legal document. A young man could lead a young lady into sin by seducing her into immorality. As I said, you could lead someone to sin by lying, speaking evil, and getting them to chime in and pass on your evil speech. Oh, there are lots of ways. You could solicit someone into drunkenness. You could give them drugs. There's no end. All the sins that you could imagine can be generated by a human agent being the point of temptation.

At this point I always think about some years back there was a guy in our church who had serious mental disabilities. And I had a special love for him and he did for me. And the Lord had worked in his heart and in the ministry to the challenged people here at Grace Church. They came to the conviction that even though he was maybe twenty-something, he was kind of seven or eight in his mind but he was determined that he knew the Lord and he wanted to be baptized. And I had developed this kind of relationship with him and I remember one day after I preached, I came down and he said to me, "Sit down, John...sit down." And right there I said...where? He said, "Right there." So I sat on the steps right after the service and he recited for me the Twenty-third Psalm which he had memorized. And it was wonderful. And he couldn't read. And I asked him how he followed me when I preached. And he said, "Well I know the numbers, so when you say verse 7, I find the 7. And when you say verse 8, I find the 8." And everybody agreed that God had done a work in his life.

And I remember one night when I baptized him. I said to him before we went in, I said, "Now, Rodney, I just want to be sure. Who is Jesus Christ?" He looked at me and wrinkled up his nose and said, "You mean, you don't even know that?" I said, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know that, I know that, yeah." He said, "I thought you knew that." I said, "Yes, I know that, I don't know why I even asked such a silly question."

But I remember one time after that, it was really a sad thing. He came to tell me with the help of someone else that his brother thought it was funny to pour beer down him and got him just absolutely drunk out of his mind and made a mockery of him. And when I thought about that I thought about this passage of this very humble, meek little fellow at the mercy of everybody around him who in the tenderest way belonged to Christ and how easily somebody could cause him to stumble.

But it's not just those kinds, it's anybody and everybody who belongs to the Lord. Do not directly solicit people to sin. You can't do that with impunity. You cannot avoid the discipline of God.

It could also be by indirect temptation...not only by direct but by indirect. You can provoke people to anger. You who are married know just exactly what to say to provoke your wife to anger. It usually has something to do with her mother...or vice versa, with your mother, or some relative in the family. You know the hot buttons to push. And when you want your revenge and you push the hot button in your indirect way, and the other person flies off the handle, you may feel no guilt but you have indirectly stimulated that response. Indirect temptation. There are so many ways you can do that.

Ephesians 6:4, you remember, it says, "Parents, do not provoke your children.." You don't want to do anything that in an indirect way, not in a direct solicitation to anger or evil, but an indirect way leads them to sin. That could be in a lack of provision, a failure to meet their needs, a failure to respond to their longings and the necessities to their life, closing up your compassion to them, causing them to be destitute, struggling and therefore perhaps doubting God.

Thirdly, by failing to lead people to righteousness. There's really no neutral ground. Hebrews 10:24 and 25 says, "When we come together, we are to stimulate one another to love and good works," right? We are to set the path so that others can walk in it by speech, thought, attitude, reaction, everything we do we are to set that path. I want to set that path for my wife. I want to set that path for my children. I want to set that path for my grandchildren. I want to set that path for all the people that I know and love and work with and the people I don't know that know me, I want to set that path for all of you. I don't ever want to do anything but lead you in a path toward righteousness. And in so doing, that means obeying all the things that the Bible defines as righteous behavior and also avoiding all of those things which would be perhaps in that freedom area but might cause somebody to stumble. Paul says if meat makes my brother stumble, I'll eat no meat. If drink is a stumbling block to someone, I won't drink. Whatever it is that might cause somebody else to stumble, I don't do that. I will gladly sacrifice my freedom to keep somebody else from stumbling.

And so, we become guilty of causing another believer to stumble when we fail to lead them in to righteousness, which could include flaunting our liberty. This is really a grievous thing for me today. There's a new attitude in these emerging church people about worldly things, having church in a saloon, having church in a bar, drinking and mocking those who don't do that. That's a concern of great significance to me because while you may take a drink and it might not have any effect on your spiritual life, you may liberate someone else to do that and it will do great damage to them. On the one hand, to their conscience if they feel it's wrong. They're training themselves to ignore their conscience. On the other hand, it may catapult them in a direction which causes them to end up in drunkenness. All of our liberties have to be circumscribed so that we don't cause somebody else to stumble. All things are lawful, Paul says, but all things are not expedient, he says to the Corinthians. All things are lawful but I will not be brought under the power of these things. All things may be lawful...and what he means by all things is all things that are not unlawful, all things that are not forbidden in themselves may be all right, but if I do those things, I give liberties and freedoms to other people who because of a lack of maturity or because of conscience do those things, plunge into sin, or ride roughshod over their consciences and then forfeit their joy and become guilt ridden. That's not helpful.

So, you can lead people into sin directly. You can lead them into sin indirectly. You can fail to lead them to righteousness. And a fourth, and it's tied to the third, by setting a sinful example. This is the other side of it. This is not leading them into righteousness but setting a sinful example. And this has to start in your home. It really has to start in your home.

You are what you are at home in reality. You are what you are 24/7 in the intimacy of your own home, your own life, and to the people who are nearest and dearest to you. And if you do not set a good example, but you set a sinful example there, then you are at that most intimate level and that highest level of spiritual responsibility and that's to the people that God has surrounded your life with

in that home, you are guilty of leading them to stumble. And so you bear not only the weight of your own sin, but you bear the sin of theirs because you've been the instrument or the agent of their own sin.

Well we could talk more about that, but I think you get the picture. But let's follow the text and at least finish this point for tonight. We expect to stumble. I admit it. We expect to stumble because we're not perfect, we're still in the flesh. We expect it but from where? From the unregenerate world in which we live, from the hostile world that is around us...not from other children in the Kingdom. Verse 7 defines that, "Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks." We expect that to come from the world. The world is the system in which Satan operates. It is inevitable that stumbling blocks come and that they come out of a fallen sinful world under the leadership of Satan. It is inevitable. But woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes. So we could add another line to our warning on the wall. If you are a believer, we warn you, you'd be better off dead than to offend another believer and cause him to stumble. And if you're an unbeliever, woe, damnation and cursing to you if you cause a believer to stumble...very, very serious.

What then from these statements is at the heart of the Lord when it comes to the life of the church? It is that we make sure we all pursue holiness and righteousness in our own lives and in behalf of others. And then in verses 8 and 9, some no doubt proverbial statements, axiomatic statements that appear in other contexts and they are hyperbolic, this is hyperbole.

"If your hand or your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than having two hands or two feet to be cast into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out and throw it from you. It's better for you to enter life with one eye than having two eyes to be cast into the fiery hell."

What is that saying? It is saying this...deal drastically with sin. Deal drastically with sin. You cannot become comfortable with sin. Deal dramatically with it. Obviously this is proverbial. If you actually cut off your hand, that is not going to save you from eternal fire. If you actually cut off or cut out your eye or cut off your feet, it is not going to assure you that you will escape from hell. The point is, take drastic action rather than sin and by your sin cause another believer to stumble.

Sometimes when a Christian student gets out of the home, goes away to college, goes into a dorm, mingles with the students, that professing Christian free from the constraints of church and mom and dad and expectation becomes a leader, an agent of temptation for the others around him or around her. You better take drastic action before you do that. You better excise whatever in your life causes you to do that because that's the kind of behavior we expect from the people who will enter into eternal fire. But not the kind we expect from believers.

And one more point. We enter like children. We treat each other like children. And how we treat each other is how we treat Christ. We protect each other like we would protect children. I just need to give you one other illustration as a father. Provision is part of the deal with my children. Provision, right? Feed them, give them a house, buy their clothes, and you know, there's a progression there. You buy them a tricycle, then you buy them a bicycle, then you buy them a car, then you help them buy a house. You know how that goes. That's part of provision. You provide the medical care they need. You provide all the things that they need in provision and protection. You also provide some direction, wisdom, knowledge, all of that. But protection is in my mind one of THE most vital aspects. And what did I want to protect my children from?

Well I used to spank them if they went near the street because I didn't want them going in the street. Kids get hit by cars in streets. That was a serious act by our children. We didn't want them to go anywhere that was dangerous. We protected them. We didn't want them to be in prolonged situations with people that were toxic. So we picked their friends and we told them with whom they could be friends with, whom they could have relationships. And most particularly, some homes they couldn't go to although they could bring anyone they wanted to our house. That was all about protection. We protected them by protecting how they think and what they were exposed to and making sure they knew the things of God, learn the things of God, memorize the Word of God, came to love the people of God. We made the church their life. And we watch them now doing it in the next generation with their children. This is part of protecting them from the things that are toxic in the world.

And that leads to the fourth point in verse 10, we value each other like children...we value each other like children. We treat each other kindly like children. We protect each other from harm like children. And we value each other. I love this, verse 10.

“See that you do not despise one of these little ones.”

I've heard this verse used so many times to talk about babies. Who despises a baby? That's not the point. You despise babies? I hate babies. Anybody say that? Get that thing away from me, can't stand babies. No. Nobody despises babies. Nobody despises children. This is little ones who belong to Me, little ones who believe in Me, keep it in context. Do not despise, kataphroneo, to think down, to think upon with contempt, with disdain, to see as worthless, to no value, useless, inferior. Do not devalue any other believer. There are no...there are no classes in the Kingdom. There is neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, bond or free and God is no respecter of...what?...of persons. It's not about intellect, social strata, economics, education, looks. We don't look down on the lowly. We don't say to the rich man, “Sit in the front row here.” And to the poor man, “Get out of the way and get over to the side under our feet,” James 2. We don't ridicule people We don't withhold from those in need because they can't reciprocate. We don't take advantage of people. We don't use people.

Why? “For I say to you,” this is very serious, verse 10, “that their angels...” What do you mean their angels? That is the angels of God in heaven assigned to the care of believers, Hebrews 1:14, angels are sent as ministering spirits to minister to the saints. “So their angels in heaven continually behold the face of My Father who is in heaven.”

What in the world is that about? The picture is very dramatic. God is in heaven. The image is the angels assigned by God to the care of believers are in heaven and they're watching the face of the Father so that when the Father demonstrates concern over how His little ones are being treated, they can be dispatched from heaven by the Father to the aid of His own children. Which means that the children of God has His full attention and His concern becomes the concern of His holy angels. That's an amazing thing.

If God is that intimately concerned with every single child who belongs to Him, then you had better not treat even the least of these little ones with contempt or disdain or you will activate concern on the face of God who will dispatch His ministering angels to care for that one. Perhaps to engage in your life even in some disciplinary fashion which may not be visible to you.

So, we enter like children. We receive one another like children. And in so doing, we receive Christ. We protect each other from harm, from sin like we would protect precious children from what harms them and we value each other with no diminishing scale. We value each other not for what each is himself or herself, but because each is a child of the Father in heaven who is concerned about their welfare.

This is where it all starts, life in the church. Next Sunday night I will perhaps finish the chapter.

Father, we don't need to say anything more than this really. This is a tremendous amount to digest. And perhaps for the first time the wonder of this portion of Scripture is dawning on us who have had some familiarity with the bits and pieces contained here. How we learn again the richness of Your Word when rightly understood. But it's not just getting the chapter right, it's so living to obey what You've commanded us. We want to live in the way that You have defined and described here as Your children. And we want to live in that way to make the evidence manifest that You are a great God and powerful and merciful and Jesus Christ is a great Savior and Redeemer and the Holy Spirit is a great transformer. We want our lives to make the message believable, that Jesus Christ offers new birth and new life, even as we saw demonstrated again tonight in baptism. So, Lord, continue to open our minds and help us apply these things for Your glory, we pray. Amen.

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