

Matthew 18:10-14 – The Wandering Sheep

Intro: Whom do you value?

Whom do you value? Who is important or valuable in your eyes? Those who are hard-working, successful, well-educated?

The Olympics have started this week, and it's all about who can go faster, stronger, higher. Thousands of people are looking to make their mark. To beat old records, to make people wonder at their skills and hard work. Billions of people are going to be watching to see the best in the world in each sport and competition.

But it's a fragile glory. You can work your whole life to get to the Olympics, but if you come fourth or fifth, you will be forgotten by society. You can be better than 7.5 billion people, but history will not remember you. You will feel like you're not valuable. You're not important. The world will not be watching you.

See, we value success don't we? We value those who have it all together. Those who don't struggle with addictions, and anger and mental health issues. And so we pretend to have it all together. We put our best selves on Facebook and Instagram. And hide those parts of us which make us look bad. Because we don't want people to look down on us.

Today, Jesus shows us who is valuable in his eyes. He shows God's heart for all his children. And if they are valuable to God, then we shouldn't look down on anyone.

1. Do Not Look Down on Any Believers

This passage continues on from Jesus' teaching the disciples, that we saw last week. The disciples were arguing about who is the greatest. And Jesus brings a little child among them and tells them that unless they become like little children, they will never enter the kingdom of God!

In this one short object lesson, he turns all human glory and praise upside down. Everything we respect and value, is worthless in God's eyes. And in fact, being like a little child, being helpless, is what God respects. Jesus even says, 'whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.' And in today's passage he says:

Matthew 18:10a See that you do not despise one of these little ones...

Now Jesus goes from talking about children, to talking about all those who believe in him. In verses 8-10 he spoke to everyone about sin saying, 'If your hand or foot causes you to stumble...' So it's clear Jesus is talking about all believers, especially those who may be struggling with sin. We are not to despise, or look down on, anyone who puts their trust and hope in Jesus.

Just take a moment to think about who you respect. Who gets your attention? See, even as believers, we subtly rate people on a scale of importance, don't we? How they rate on the social pecking order. How rich they are. What job they do. How good they look. How well they speak, or know the Bible, or explain the gospel.

Last week, I was having some time off, and I got a call from a friend who is a believer. He's not in our church. He struggles with sin. He's got a lot of social problems. Frankly, he's hard work. And I let the call go through to voicemail. Then a few minutes later, I got a call from an SMBC lecturer. And I was tempted to take the call. Why? What was going on in my heart right then?

Wasn't it because deep down in my heart, I believed he was more important, even a little bit? And I had to tell myself, 'No, if you're not going to take the call from your friend, you're not going to take it from the lecturer.' Jesus says, 'Do not despise, do not look down on, these little ones.' Why?

2. For they live in God's presence

Jesus says, they are precious, because they live in God's presence:

Matthew 18:10b *For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.*

We shouldn't despise, or look down on any believers, because their angels get to see God face to face. What does this passage mean? Who are these angels? It's easy to read this with our cultural baggage. In movies and in some Christian traditions, there's this idea that each believer has a guardian angel assigned to them. Your guardian angel follows you around and watches over you. It protects you and saves you from dangerous situations. But is that what this passage is saying?

Well, firstly, look at what it's not saying. It's not saying these believers' angels follow them around and protect them. Because they *always* see the face of the Father in heaven. They can't be watching over the believers on earth and looking at God at the same time. And when you look at the rest of the Bible, it never says that each of God's people gets their own personal angel. It does say that angels help God's people from time to time, but not that there's an angel for each person. From places like Daniel and Zechariah, there seems to be one angel for each nation.

There's one passage that might help. In Acts, when King Herod is trying to stop the Apostles speaking about Jesus, he rounds up some of them and puts them in prison. He even kills James, the brother of John. The Apostle Peter was one of the men he put in prison, and the church was earnestly praying for him. But God miraculously freed him from his chains and even made the city gates open for him.

Then he goes to the house of Mary, the mother of Mark, where many believers were praying.

Acts 12:13-15 *Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant named Rhoda came to answer the door.*

¹⁴ *When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!"* ¹⁵ *"You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said, "It must be his angel."*

What do they mean by his angel? Do they mean his guardian angel? If so, does that mean that guardian angels sound like the people they are guarding? For the servant girl recognized his voice.

The simplest explanation is that they thought Peter was dead, and it was his ghost or spirit. That's why it sounded like Peter. Jesus says that in the new creation, believers will be like the angels, in that they will not

be married, and they will no longer die. And, when Jesus first appeared to all the disciples, they thought it was a ghost too.

So it seems Jesus is saying each believers' spirit will look on God's face forever. Jesus uses the present tense, as though right now, their spirits are looking at the Father's face. That is an amazing thought, isn't it? In the Old Testament, no one could see God face to face, and live. But these believers' spirits always get to look on the face of God.

Paul uses similar language by saying that we are already seated with Christ in the heavenly realms. Spiritually we are, right now, in God's presence. Though in this life we are weak, and struggle with sin, we are destined to spend all of eternity gazing at the glory of God. How is this possible? Not because of our goodness, or power or achievements. But because we are clothed in the pure, perfect life of Jesus. We don't have to hide who we are, or pretend we have it all together. God loves us just as we are. We can see God's face and not die, because Christ has washed us clean by his blood and made us pure and holy.

So how can we despise, or look down on any believer, when they will share eternity with us in God's presence? If we think any believer is lower than us, or less valuable than us, then we have not understood what Jesus has done. We are relying on our own goodness, rather than the grace of Jesus.

When we stand in God's presence, all our righteous deeds will be shown to be filthy rags. And only those clothed in the robe of Christ's righteousness will stand. If you think you can look at God's face because of your own performance, you will be destroyed by his holiness. Because we are all guilty and unclean before him. If you are enjoying God's mercy, then you will not look down on anyone else who is doing the same.

3. For God doesn't want to lose a single one

The second reason we shouldn't look down on anyone, is because of the great lengths God goes to rescue them:

***Matthew 18:12-13** What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? ¹³ And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off.*

You and I might think, 'Well if I had a hundred sheep and one of them wanders off, that's ok. I'd still have ninety-nine! But God is not like that. He loves each sheep so much that he leaves the ninety-nine sheep and goes looking for that one wandering sheep, until he finds it. He loves that sheep so much that the joy he has when he finds that one is greater than the ninety-nine who did not wander away.

It's not saying that he loves that one more than the ninety-nine, but that every single one of his children is precious. As Jesus says to finish up:

***Matthew 18:14** In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish.*

If my kids are out playing I sometimes joke that if something happens to one of them, 'Oh well, I've got two more.' But that's exactly what it is – a joke. I would never joke about something like that if there was any

truth to it. I love each one of my boys personally, intimately. If I lost any of them my life would never be the same. I would be permanently scarred. My mum used to say a mother's love defies Maths. She can love each one of her boys with her whole heart.

If you speak to any couple who have lost a child, they will tell you that they never get over it. One of the most insensitive things people can say to them is, 'At least you've got other children.' Or, 'you can always try again.' They just don't get it. Even if they have seven more children, they will never replace the one they lost. If we can love each of our children so much, how much more for God, the Author of love?

Of course, we know this is more than just a parable. For God went to the incredible lengths of becoming a human being, in the person of Jesus to find us. He entered the pain of this sinful world, and was humiliated and killed on a cross, to bring us back to him. And he is not willing that any of us would perish.

Maybe you have been listening today and know in your heart that you have been wandering away from God. Maybe you think, 'I'm only one person. God's got heaps of believers. Why would he care about me?' Listen to Jesus. God would leave the ninety-nine sheep who are not wandering away to come looking for you. He is not willing that *any* should perish. There is a reason you are listening today. He does not want to lose you. And he will come looking for you, until he has you back safe in his arms.

Back in September 1997, a 2-year-old boy went missing while playing near his home in Shanxi province, China. Over 500 people searched for the boy in nearby bus and train stations, but no clues were found. But the boy's father never gave up hope. He magnified his son's photo and had it printed on a flag with the message, "Where are you my son? Daddy will take you home."

He then went on a tireless search on his motorbike, flying the flag across the world's most populous nation. He said, "I thought there may a ray of hope in finding my son if I go out searching for him. If I stay at home, there is no chance." He embarked on a mammoth search, distributing fliers in almost every part of the country. He travelled more than half a million kilometers. While looking for his own son amid the murky world of human trafficking, Mr Guo was able to find a number of other lost children for several other families, and carried around a collection of missing-persons notices.

2 Sundays ago, after 24 years, his son was found... He had been snatched by human traffickers and taken to the neighbouring province of Henan, the one that is now flooding in the news. How much this father loved his son, that he went out looking for him, and never gave up hope.

Brothers and sisters, your heavenly father loves you this much. If this is what our Father is like, how much should we treasure and value each of his children. We should not give up on them, or look down on them. No matter how weak we think they are, or how much they struggle with sin. We are to pray and encourage those who have wandered away to come back to God.

You and I have been shown amazing, relentless love. How will we display God's heart by the way we love and value his little ones. Let's pray.