

## OUR FATHER DOES NOT WANT ANY TO BE LOST

Matthew 18:1-14

Key Verse: 18:14

“In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost.”

In this passage the disciples come to Jesus with a question about who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Their question reveals that they did not know about the kingdom of heaven at all. They had preached the good news that the kingdom of heaven was near, but they did not know the character or nature of the kingdom. It is somewhat surprising. To teach them, Jesus uses a little child as an audio-visual aid. Jesus first teaches them how to enter the kingdom of heaven. Then Jesus teaches them how to be great in the kingdom of heaven. Most of all, Jesus teaches them the heart of God. God is not willing that any of his little ones be lost. Today, let's learn the heart of God from Jesus.

First, to enter the kingdom, change and become humble (1-4).

Look at verse 1. “At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’” It was a crucial time for the disciples. They had accepted Jesus as the Christ, but their concept of the Christ was not correct. They believed the Christ would establish a kingdom on earth, restoring the power and glory of Israel, and that they would be like cabinet members in this kingdom. When Jesus taught that he must suffer, die and rise again, they recoiled and wanted to reject it. But Jesus did not compromise with them. Jesus repeatedly taught that he came as a suffering servant who would be betrayed and killed for the sin of the world, and rise from the dead on the third day. The disciples could not grasp Jesus’ teaching because they did not like Jesus’ teaching. They were earthbound, and their hopes were totally wrapped up in this world. With every step they took toward Jerusalem, they felt more urgently that they should stake their claim for the best cabinet posts. Finally, they burst out to Jesus, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” It meant, “Who ranks number one among us?” Their ancillary question was, “How can I be number one?”

The disciples had decided to follow Jesus, leaving behind their families and their jobs. They did not receive any salary. They had to be ready to move anywhere, at any time. They had to be ready to receive any kind of training. Outwardly, they seemed to sacrifice everything for Jesus. Still, hidden in their hearts, was a desire to live forever in this world in glory and honor. This desire gave birth to a fantastic dream when they saw Jesus’ miracles. Ultimately, this dream was rooted in their selfish ambition. How did Jesus deal with his disciples?

Look at verses 2-4. “He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: ‘I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.’”

Jesus’ answer must have been shocking to the disciples. First of all, Jesus seemed to be praising a little child in their midst for no obvious reason. To the disciples, Jesus’ one word of praise was more valuable than pure gold. They would do anything to obtain Jesus’ praise. But here was a little child, who had done nothing, being honored among them as if he were somebody. But the real shock came when they heard Jesus imply that they were not even in the kingdom, let alone candidates for greatness. So their concern should not be about who is the greatest, but about entering the kingdom. Jesus helped them confront this most important issue. Many people are so busy chasing power and glory in this world that they neglect the kingdom of heaven. But sooner or later, entering the kingdom of heaven is the most vital issue to each person.

How then could they enter the kingdom of heaven? Look at verse 3. “And he said, ‘I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.’” The disciples needed to change. How much? A little? Was it a matter of changing their crude speech or unruly ways of eating? Was it a matter of cutting their long hair or learning how to wear decent clothes? No. They needed to make a complete transformation from physical men to spiritual men. As St. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:50, “...flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God....” We must all be changed into spiritual people to enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus told Nicodemus, “No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the spirit” (Jn 3:5). Entering the kingdom of heaven requires a change so drastic that it is compared to a new birth. This new birth is carried out by God through the work of the Holy Spirit. This new birth gives us a living hope in the kingdom of

God. As yet, the disciples had not experienced this new birth because Jesus had not died and risen, and the Holy Spirit had not been given. The Holy Spirit would come upon them in power at Pentecost.

Though the disciples could not understand the full meaning, Jesus plainly taught them that they needed to learn humility. Look at verse 4. "Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." The important quality in the kingdom of heaven is humbleness. Humbleness is to acknowledge God as God. Humbleness is to obey God with holy reverence. Humbleness is to acknowledge oneself as a sinner and repent of one's sins. Humbleness is to depend on God in prayer instead of depending on one's own strength and ability. Humbleness is to recognize that one needs to grow and to learn the character of Christ with all diligence. Jesus is the great example of humbleness. Philippians 2:5-8 says, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!" Ultimately, humbleness is to acknowledge God's purpose for our lives and to live up that purpose even though it requires much suffering.

By nature, human beings are the opposite of humble; we are proud. A clear example is Pharaoh in the book of Exodus. When God sent Moses to him with a command to let his people go and worship him, Pharaoh said, "Who is the Lord that I should obey him?" Pharaoh was proud because his nation had a prosperous economy and a strong military. Pharaoh thought he could ignore God and enjoy his power and glory endlessly. It was an illusion borne out of his proud mind. Through ten plagues God systematically humiliated Egypt's national pride and destroyed their economy. Then God drowned the Egyptian army in the Red Sea. (The remnants of their chariots are on the sea floor to this day.) In the end, Pharaoh lost everything, including his only son. James 4:6b says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." At this time, the disciples acted more like Pharaoh than Moses. Jesus wanted them to change their attitude completely and learn the humbleness of a child. A humble person is recognized by God. A humble person is blessed by God. A humble person becomes great in the sight of God.

Those whom God uses greatly, he humbles sufficiently. Numbers 12:3 says that Moses was the most humble man on the face of the earth. Moses did not become humble by himself. Moses became humble because God made him humble. Once Moses was a prince in Egypt. He was powerful in speech and action, and confident about his ability. He wanted to help his fellow Israelites to be freed from their bondage. He decided to give up all the treasures of Egypt to identify himself with them. He made a bold move and killed an Egyptian, thinking his people would rally to him in a slave rebellion. But his own people rejected him, saying, "Who made you ruler and judge over us?" Instead of becoming a deliverer, Moses became a political criminal and a murderer. He had to flee to Midian, where he lived as a shepherd watching over smelly sheep. He remained in this condition for forty long years. At the end of that time, God spoke to him from a burning bush and revealed his great purpose to deliver the Israelites, using Moses as his instrument. But Moses really did not want to accept it, saying, "Send someone else." Moses had completely despaired of himself. Even God had a hard time persuading Moses to accept his calling. Finally Moses accepted it. From that time on Moses obeyed the word of God absolutely, in all detail. God used him greatly as a deliverer and as the lawgiver to his people.

When we want to enter the kingdom of heaven we must be humble. When we want to be great in the kingdom of heaven we must be humble. We cannot make ourselves humble. But God can humble us by his power and wisdom. When we ask God's mercy, he will help us to overcome our pride and be truly humble. There is an interesting story about a boxer, George Foreman. When he was young he was so strong that he could knock out any opponent with one punch. He became the heavyweight boxing champion of the world. Then he fought the legendary Muhammad Ali. Confident of his superior strength and size, Foreman tried to knock Ali out in dramatic fashion, punching wildly, using all his energy. Foreman's coach warned him to restrain himself, but he would not listen. Finally Foreman was exhausted and Ali knocked him out and won the fight. After that Foreman lived with a sense of defeat. In his depression he turned to God and accepted Jesus as his Savior. He became a preacher. As the years went by, he found the strength in God to confront his past failure. He entered the boxing world again at the age of 38, far past retirement age for a boxer. He looked more like a jolly grandfather than a boxer. Nevertheless, he won several fights and finally had a chance to fight the reigning heavyweight champion, Michael Moorer, a much younger man. For most of the fight, Foreman seemed to be losing badly. But his coach kept shouting, "Bang, bang the nose. Bang, bang the nose." And Foreman did his best to hit Moorer on the nose with one-two combinations. Finally, to everyone's surprise, Moorer was knocked out. Foreman became the heavyweight champion of the world again at age 45. The secret to his victory was his humility. When he was humble, he could listen to and obey his coach.

Humble people win final victory. Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." Let's learn true humility like our Lord Jesus Christ.

Second, the way to become truly great in the kingdom (5-10).

Humility is the foundation of greatness in God. Humble people are useful to God. Humble people are a blessing to others. In this part, Jesus teaches two things that truly humble people do. Humble people welcome little ones in Jesus' name. And humble people cut off sin. Look at verse 5. "And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me." New Christians are like little children. They are weak and vulnerable. How they are received by a Christian fellowship makes a tremendous difference in their spiritual lives. A few weeks ago, Russian President Putin stopped in the midst of a crowd, greeted a little boy, and then pulled up his T-shirt and kissed him on the belly. It was a tender moment. The little boy felt that he was a very important person and even began to think that he could be president of Russia someday. In the same way, when a new Christian is welcomed into fellowship, his faith grows and he can become strong in Christ. Jesus wants his servants to welcome little ones with love and respect, and to see them with a great hope. Those who do so welcome Christ himself.

In contrast, there are those who cause new Christians to sin. Look at verse 6. "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." In this verse the word "sin" is translated from the Greek word "skandalizo." It means to offend, or to cause to fall away. The NASB translates it as "to stumble." If new Christians are not welcomed, but despised or discouraged, they can easily fall away from Christ. Some people deliberately try to make new Christians stumble. In this Information Age, some people use the internet to spread slander about Christian churches or organizations. They may think they can do so freely. But if their activity causes a new Christian to stumble, they are in big trouble. Jesus says it would be better to drown violently than to face the consequences of such an action. It is not only enemies of God who make new Christians stumble. Those in the church can do so as well. Look at verse 10. "See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven." Little ones may look weak, but they are surrounded by the angels of God who will report to God if they are despised. Therefore, we must always regard little ones with great respect and love.

Causing others to sin is a serious matter. It does not happen by accident. It happens when we are not clear about sin. Let's read verses 8-9. "If your hand or your foot causes you to sin cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell." Jesus is not telling us to literally cut off our body parts. Some of us would have nothing left. Mr. Zidane of France would have to cut off his head. It is not our body parts that cause us to sin; sin is a spiritual disease. We must deal decisively with sin, like Martin Luther did. In light of this teaching, what should we do with our televisions, computers, cell phones, ipods, and video games? We must resist sin as a matter of life and death. Then we can be a good influence and great in the kingdom.

Third, learn the heart of God (12-14).

Jesus concludes by teaching the heart of God for one lost sheep. Look at verses 12-14. "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? And if he finds it, I tell you the truth, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should be lost." When a shepherd loses one sheep out of a hundred, he does not say, "Well, I still have ninety-nine." Instead, he goes out and looks for the one that wandered off. He can be compared to a mother who has six children. If one of them wanders off, she does not say, "Well, it is okay. I still have five more." Instead, she will take any risk to go and look for the lost child. Though there are billions of people on the earth, God loves each person absolutely. When one person is lost in sin, God's heart aches for that person. God does not say, "It's okay. I still have six billion." God makes every effort to find the lost one. Each person is as precious to God as an only son. God knows each person intimately. God cares for each person with an everlasting love. When one lost person comes back to God, there is great joy in heaven.

Here we must learn the heart of God. God wants to save one lost sheep at any cost. In order to save lost sinners, God sent his one and only Son Jesus to the cross as a ransom sacrifice for our sins. God sacrificed everything to save his lost sheep. God's care for one person is absolute. Therefore, as shepherds of God's flock we must also care for one person with the absolute love of God. This requires sacrifice and suffering loss. It requires us to change completely from earthbound people to godly people with the character of Christ.

Jesus' teaching was not lost on his disciples. After Jesus suffered on the cross, Peter realized that it was for him that Jesus was wounded and died. Peter was healed from his sinsickness. He overcame his inner pride, selfishness and fear and became a shepherd for the lost children of God. Peter learned the heart of God. He suffered much to lead the early church and to care for the scattered children of God during the persecution of the early church. Peter wrote in 1 Peter 5:2-4, "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away."

The Apostle Paul also learned the heart of God from Jesus. Before knowing Jesus he was a slave to selfish ambition. In his spiritual blindness, he tried to destroy the church of God. But Jesus' sacrificial love changed him into a mother-like shepherd. Once, while in prison for the gospel, he could care for a runaway slave named Onesimus as if he were his own son. Paul said in Acts 20:28, "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood."

In this passage we learn that we must be changed to enter the kingdom of heaven and be great in it. We must be changed from proud people into humble people. We must be changed from selfish people into sacrificial people. We must be changed until we can learn the heart of God for one lost sinner. Lord, grant us your heart to seek the lost ones and bring them to Jesus through the Summer Bible Conference. Save all the lost ones, missing no one.