

***The Church of the Servant King***  
**Survey of the Bible Series**  
***The Gospel of Matthew***  
(Lesson SB-MT18A)

**Introduction**

Matthew 18 contains the fourth of five discourses in Matthew's gospel. The five discourses in Matthew are:

- The Sermon on the Mount [5-7]
- The Commissioning of the Twelve Apostles to Israel [10]
- Parables regarding the Kingdom [13]
- Teaching regarding humility [18]
- Teaching regarding His 2<sup>nd</sup> Advent [24-25].

In this discourse in Chapter 18, Jesus relates the principle of humility to five different aspects of Kingdom life:

- Entrance into the Kingdom (vv 2-3)
- Greatness in the Kingdom (v 4)
- Prevention of "offenses" (vv 5-11)
- Governance within the assembly (vv 15-20)
- Forgiveness in the Kingdom (vv 21-35)

The disciples (v 1) are probably the twelve apostles plus other disciples. The child (v 2) may have been Peter's if the house is his (17:25 & Mk 9:33). Humility in this passage is total trust in the Lord's provision and not one's own. The parallel passages in the other Gospels are Mark 9:33-50 & Luke 9:46-48.

**Who is the Greatest (18:1-5)**

Mark (9:33-38) says that the disciples were disputing along the way and when challenged, they became silent. Luke (9:46-48) says that Jesus discerned their thoughts. Most likely, Jesus detected their rivalry (Luke), challenged them, and thereby silenced them (Mark), after which they blurted out their question. Their question was not without some basis:

- Jesus had said that there would be distinctions in the Kingdom (5:19)
- Three of the apostles to Israel (Peter, James, & John) appeared to have been the recipients of special revelation (17:1-3)
- Peter had been repeatedly singled out even if some of those occasions also included a rebuke:
  - 14:28-29 – Peter walks on the water
  - 15:15 – Peter speaks on behalf of all apostles
  - 16:16-18 – Jesus gives Peter special authority
  - 16:22-23 – Jesus rebukes Peter for stating that he will prevent Jesus from being killed.
  - 17:4 – Peter speaks on behalf of the apostles
  - 17:24-27 – Peter is singled out to pay the temple tax
- In the case of James & John, their ambition had most likely been set in motion by their mother (see 20:20-21) and it had sparked the jealousy of the other ten (20:24)

In verses 3-4, Jesus uses the child as an ideal, not of innocence, purity, or faith, but of humility and unconcern for social status. A child is not in a position to advance us in society. Jesus has taught His disciples humility of mind, but not childlike thinking (cf. 10:16). If the disciples (more than just the 12) do not trust only in Him as Savior, they cannot enter the Kingdom. The Kingdom (and eternal salvation) cannot be gained by personal merit (or by violent force – 11:12).

## Jesus Warns Against Offenses in the Kingdom (18:6-9)

It is probably best to view verse 5 with verses 6-9 for two reasons: 1) verse 4 concludes verses 1-4 with a summary (v 4 seems to conclude Jesus' response to the disciples question whereas verse 5 begins a separate, but related discourse); and 2) verses 5-6 are closely related much like a proverb of warning. This division or segregation affects the interpretation of the passage as follows:

- In verses 1-4, the "little child" is literally a small child/children.
- In verses 5-6, the "little child" and the "little ones who believe in me" is a reference to the believing disciples whom Jesus is addressing.
- Most likely, the disciples included more than just the 12 and that group could have included both believing and non-believing disciples.
- The one who welcomes "a little child like this in my name" (v 5) is not welcoming literal children but "children" defined in the previous verses – those who humble themselves to become like children, i.e. Jesus' true disciples.
- The one who welcomes the disciple does not do so because the disciple has great social status, occupies a position of influence, or is mighty in a worldly sense, but simply because they come in Jesus' name.
- The phrases "in My name" (v 5), "who believe in me" (v 6), and the necessity of becoming childlike to even enter the kingdom (v 3) supports the view that those referred to in verses 5-6 are simply Jesus' disciples, not literal children or some smaller group of especially humble disciples.
- The period of time at issue is determined by the phrase "kingdom of heaven."
- The phrases "kingdom of heaven" and "kingdom of God" in the Gospel of Matthew is always a reference to the Messianic reign of Christ on earth.
- "Enter the kingdom of heaven" implies that Jesus is teaching the determining criteria for entry into that kingdom, therefore actions and attitudes reflected prior to the Messianic reign of Christ on earth is begun.
- Those actions and attitudes will be manifested during the period we know as the Tribulation, i.e. Daniel's 70<sup>th</sup> week of Daniel 9:20ff.
- The "little ones" (i.e. the disciples) can stumble and still enter the kingdom (Matt 14:28-31; 25:40, 45; 26:30-35).
- The one who "causes one of these little ones who believe in me "to stumble" is an unbeliever as manifested by their attitude which rejects Christ (10:14-15; 25:45-46).
- The person who welcomes one of these "little ones" simply because they are His welcomes Jesus Himself (10:42).
- More than just hospitality of a human good origin is in view, rather it is a hospitality linked with Jesus' name
- To "sin" or "stumble" (v 6) means that as a result of their rejection by the unbeliever, the disciples become discouraged and sin (i.e. sins of omission or commission). It does not necessarily refer to apostasy, i.e. complete denial of Christ, although some believers will be guilty of that sin during the Tribulation. To stumble is not limited to apostasy.
- These verses are aimed at encouraging the disciples who will face the world's opposition.

The principle behind verse 7 is this – because man has free will in the Angelic Conflict, many men of the world will not believe; however, this does not mitigate their responsibility before God (cf. Isa 10:5; Matt 24:9-14).

In verses 8-9, we see that the disciples have a responsibility for themselves also. Failure to deal with sin in their own lives reflects an allegiance to the world that in those cases where the disciple has never believed in Christ as the Messiah, he/she faces eternal banishment from the kingdom. (Remember, a disciple just meant a student. It did not necessarily imply belief. Some were disciples just out of curiosity).

### **The Parable of the Lost Sheep (18:10-14)**

Some have used this verse to support the concept of guardian angels. No where in Scripture or Jewish tradition of the NT period is there any suggestion that there is one angel for one person. I believe that the best explanation for this passage is that the “angels” are equivalent with the “little ones” and is a reference to their spirits after death. The word “angel” is used in the same manner in Acts 12:15 to refer to Peter’s spirit. So, the phrase “their angels” simply refers to their continued existence in the heavenly Father’s presence.

The point of verses 12-14 is that the Father’s concern for the one wandering sheep is so great that he rejoices more over its restoration than over the ninety-nine that do not stray (v 13). With a God like that, how dare anyone cause even one of the sheep to go astray? If it is the Father’s will that not any of the little ones to be lost, then to lead one of them astray is contrary to the Father’s will.