

**The Parable of the Lost Sheep**  
**Matthew 18:7-14**  
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Matthew 18 continues the section of Christ's training of the disciples for their future ministry. Matthew 18 is the fourth major discourse of Jesus' teaching in the Gospel of Matthew.

1. The sermon on the mount (5:1-7:29) focused on righteousness
2. The mission discourse (10:1-42) focused on ministry
3. The kingdom parables (13:1-53) focused on the messianic kingdom
4. The discipleship discourse (18:1-19:1) focused on humility
5. The Olivet discourse (24:1-25:46) focused on the second coming of Jesus

In chapter 18, we see how followers of Jesus should function in relation to those in various situations. We must serve those in need, not harm them, and we must pursue forgiveness. The chapter reads as Jesus spoke to the disciples the entire chapter on one occasion. This discourse took place in the town of Capernaum (cf. Mark 9:33-35).

Matthew 18:7-14 continues Jesus' discourse that answered the disciples' question "*Who then is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?*" (Matthew 18:1). It is the one who humbles himself that is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven (18:3). There is therefore no rivalry in the kingdom of heaven, but rather humility.

The image of one who humbles himself was a small child that Jesus set before them. The child's necessary dependency and trust illustrates a believer in Jesus. Jesus then uses the term "*these little ones*" to refer to those who truly, and humbly, believe in Him (18:6). This will also be used in Matthew 18:10 and 18:14.

**Woe to the world (18:7)**

The woe that Jesus spoke of is the judgment upon those of the world that bring stumbling blocks. Those who might stumble are the "*the little ones who believe in Me*" (18:6). The world refers to the people of the world who bring stumbling blocks to those who believe in Jesus.

The stumbling blocks are what causes the little ones to stumble, which is set in contrast to *“whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me”* (18:5). When one of these little ones is not received, they are caused to stumble. The stumbling blocks then are anything that creates difficulty for the humble to follow Jesus in faith.

To hinder any of the humble little ones from sincerely exercising true faith is a serious thing. The people of this world will be judged, and will be judged harshly according to Matthew 18:6, *“It would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.”* Jesus had taught that *“the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and WILL THEN REPAY EVERY MAN ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS”* in Matthew 16:27 and this repayment will include those who bring stumbling blocks.

It is inevitable that the world will bring stumbling blocks to the followers of Christ. Yet this does not eliminate the culpability of those who bring these difficulties, for *“woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes!”* God does not cause these stumbling blocks, but He sovereignly uses these evil things to accomplish His divine purpose in the lives of the little ones. The evil deeds surrounding the crucifixion of Christ is the classic case of God using the sinfulness of man to bring about a glorious end.

As followers of Jesus, we must be fully aware that stumbling blocks will come to God’s people from the world. This must be expected for Jesus said it is inevitable. The evil one will use the world’s system and values to make following Jesus difficult. In many places, and at many times, there is great societal opposition to Christianity. At times, there may be financial disadvantages to true believers. Family pressure may be exerted against the little ones who believe in Jesus. Many have been unjustly accused, arrested, and put to death for the sake of Christ.

Yet we can also know that the justice of God will prevail over all those who bring opposition to the followers of Jesus. This confidence we can have should lead us to trusting the Lord to repay such evil and to not take up the attack ourselves. We, the humble, little ones, are called to peace, not conflict.

*“If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY,’ says the Lord. ‘BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS ON HIS HEAD.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”* (Romans 12:18-21).

### **Warning to the disciples (18:8-11)**

Matthew 18:8-9 is very similar to Matthew 5:29-30. In both statements, Jesus compares losing a physical body part to eternal destruction. Verse 8 directly parallels verse 9, with the cause of the stumble, followed by the response and the reason for the action taken. The language is hyperbolic and dramatic. While not literal, this figure of speech communicates the very serious nature of causing stumbling.

Here, Jesus specifically addresses the disciples. The implication is that the disciples are not only the little ones upon which stumbling blocks may come, but also the potential cause of such stumbling blocks themselves. Certainly Judas was one that fell away.

The references in verses 8-9 are singular, not plural, indicating that Jesus spoke about an individual. The consequences of being cast into the eternal fire are individual as well. Therefore, as with Matthew 5:29-30, people can cause themselves difficulties in following Christ by what they do.

Yet verse 10 points the meaning to causing the little ones to stumble, “*see that you do not despise one of these little ones.*” This is the same concept that was stated by Jesus in verses 5-6, where not receiving one in Jesus’ name was linked to causing one of these little ones to stumble. Therefore, the issue for the disciples was not limited to their actions regarding themselves, but more specifically, their actions that result in despising one of these little ones.

There is certainly a relationship between our own personal difficulties regarding our own faith, and causing difficulties for the humble followers of Jesus. The first place to look to protect ourselves from despising the people of God is to ourselves. If we in faith refrain from hindering ourselves from following Jesus, we will be protected from becoming a stumbling block for others.

We become a stumbling block when we in pride consider ourselves better than the humble followers of Jesus. When we use worldly standards of measure to evaluate believers in Christ and look down upon them, we are not humble. If we always think we know better than others, the words of Jesus in Matthew 18:3 are spoken to us, “*Truly I say to you, unless you are converting and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.*”

By despising the humble followers of Jesus, we are not receiving them and we become a hindrance to their faith. It is a serious matter to act as their judge in matters of personal freedom (not objective biblical commands, cf. John 7:24).

The reason for us to not despise these little ones is because *“their angels in heaven continually see the face of My Father who is in heaven.”* This verse has become the main verse for the belief that each person, and particularly children, has their own guardian angel. This angel is considered to be in heaven, and by seeing the Father’s face, they always have access to God on our behalf.

However, there are issues with this traditional perspective. First, there is no clear indication either in this verse or elsewhere in the Scriptures that each person has an angel assigned to them. Also, the little ones in verse 10 are not children but disciples of Christ who are humble, like children.

Angels in general are said to be sent by God to minister to His people in Hebrews 1:14, *“Are they not all ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation?”* However, this role is unspecific, and is not described as guarding and protecting us. What exactly this service may be is beyond our ability to know fully.

Some have used Acts 12:15 as support for an individual angel, when those doubting Peter’s freedom from prison considered Peter to be *“his angel.”* Yet, this is not a teaching of the Scripture but rather an exclamation of people who doubted the work of God in freeing Peter. We must base our doctrine upon the truth statements of the word of God, not the reactions of doubters.

The concept of a guardian angel is rooted in the beliefs of certain church fathers, such as Jerome (d. 420 AD). This provided the foundation for the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, among others, toward the doctrine of guardian angels. From the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, *“Beside each believer stands an angel as protector and shepherd leading him to life.”* Catholics are taught to pray to their guardian angel and specific prayers are suggested.

In contrast to the Catholic view of Matthew 18:10, B.B. Warfield suggested these angels are the spirits of the little ones after their death. Those in heaven will see God (cf. 1 John 3:2) and this view explains why the little ones ought not to be despised, since they are destined to be in the glory of the presence of the Father. However, it appears to be a stretch to view the word “angel” as one who has departed into glory. While the word “angel” can be translated as “messenger” or “herald,” this view appears too difficult to consider.

Because these angels are in the presence of the Father in heaven, those that they serve are therefore of great value. That these angels continually have access to the Father is a sign of God’s love for His children. If God has provided angelic care for His little ones, then certainly no human should despise them.

Matthew 19:11 is not found in the best and oldest Greek manuscripts of Matthew. It appears to be an interpolation from Luke 19:10, "*For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost,*" where an early copyist considered it to be helpful to insert this statement of Jesus in an attempt to connect verse 10 with verses 12-14. There is little doubt that this verse was not in the original writing of Matthew.

### **Wandering sheep (18:12-14)**

Matthew 18:12-14 is the parable of the lost sheep. The parallel passage is Luke 15:3-7. In Matthew, the disciples were being addressed and in Luke, the Pharisees and scribes were addressed. These religious leaders criticized Jesus by saying, "*This man receives sinners and eats with them.*" In response to them, Jesus told them the parable of the lost sheep.

While this parable was spoken on two different occasions, Luke 15:3-7 provides a perspective of those who despised the little ones. The Pharisees and scribes viewed that such little ones should not be received or eaten with and objected to Jesus, who welcomed them. When we do not welcome the humble disciples of Jesus, we are following the footsteps of the Pharisees and scribes, who were not humble like children, and who will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus began the parable with the question, "*What do you think?*" We will find Him prefacing His words with this question again in Matthew 17:25; 21:28; 22:17, 42; and 26:66. Moving people to think is an important part of ministry, for everyone must give consideration to the revelation of God. We ought to be more concerned with the thinking of people than the actions of people in ministry, since our actions follow our thoughts.

The parable of the lost sheep is short and simple. There are two repeated contingent statements. The first conditional clause regards if there is a case where a sheep within a flock has gone astray. Jesus asked a rhetorical question, stating that of course a shepherd would leave the other sheep of the flock in order to find the one sheep that had wandered off.

The second condition occurs when that sheep that had wandered off is found. The man is far more joyful in finding that sheep than in retaining the other ninety-nine sheep. This of course does not insinuate the man does not care equally for each of the other sheep, nor is this about the neglect of the other sheep. The point of the parable regards the joy of finding the lost sheep. This compares to our experience, for when we lose something and find it, we never think about all that we have not lost, we only are glad that we found what we lost.

In this parable, the man with the hundred sheep represents God and the sheep represent the little ones. Jesus emphasized God's love for even one of His true followers in order to instruct His disciples to receive them, rather than to despise them. If God cares so much about a single little one, then certainly His followers ought to welcome them as well, and certainly not place barriers that deter them from following Jesus.

Since this parable teaches the love of God toward these little ones, it cannot be understood as the model for our ministry. Jesus came to seek and to save that which was lost (Luke 19:10), but instructed the disciples to "*shake the dust off your feet*" (Matthew 10:14; cf. Matthew 7:6). This is not an injunction to chase down everyone who passes through our lives or our church. We know that many will fall away (cf. Matthew 13:20-22) and there are many examples of such in the word of God. Our responsibility is to receive those who humbly seek the Lord.

The conclusion of this parable is a summary, "*So it is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones perish.*" God has determined from eternity past that each of the sheep would be saved, and none of them would be lost (cf. Ephesians 1:4-5). From the parable, He rejoices with the salvation of every one of them.

Matthew 18:14 only applies specifically to "*these little ones.*" God wills the eternal destiny of these humble followers of Jesus. Other New Testament verses teach God's desire for all men to not perish. "*The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance*" (2 Peter 3:9). "*This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth*" (1 Timothy 2:3-4).

The distinction between Matthew 18:14 and these other verses is that Jesus spoke about the will of the Father. Peter and Paul wrote about the desires of God. What is the will of God is certain to occur. Followers of Jesus can have great hope that we, as one of these little ones, will not perish but have eternal life (cf. John 3:16).

God does not desire any to perish, but God's justice brings about judgment, as this very chapter has taught. While God's sovereign will must occur, God's desires may not occur, for in His profound wisdom, His specific will must precede His desires. Certainly, not all will be saved and therefore, God's desire for all men to be saved is mitigated by other considerations. These other considerations surround the unbelief of man, along with the will of God that determines to allow their rebellion to result in eternal destruction.

The teaching of the Scripture consistently teaches the sovereignty of God in salvation in a positive manner, as found in Matthew 18:14. It is not the will of the Father that any of these little ones should perish. The sovereign God is also the judge of those who cause one of these little ones to stumble. The Bible does not describe God as willing the destruction of those opposed to Him, but rather with phrases such as "God gave them over" (cf. Roman 1:24, 26, 28). God determines to allow them to reap the consequences of their sinfulness.

### **Conclusion**

We learned that it is inevitable that stumbling blocks will come upon those whom God has drawn to Himself. The people of the world will bring difficulties to these little ones, who like children, seek to follow Jesus by faith. We can trust the Lord to judge the one that brings these stumbling blocks.

The disciples of Christ must also receive these little ones, rather than despising them. Sadly, those who claim allegiance to Christ have caused much difficulty for those who seek after the Lord. Rather than receiving these little ones with joy, they consider them as beneath themselves, and use them for their own personal gain. If our Father who is in heaven loves and cares for them, we cannot in any way despise the humble followers of Jesus.

While stumbling blocks will come to hinder us from being faithful to Jesus, God will keep these little ones for, "the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, "The Lord knows those who are His" (2 Timothy 2:19). Our destiny as believers in Christ is secure, regardless of the evil of others (John 10:27-29).

Matthew 18:15-20 will expand upon these first fourteen verses of the chapter. When one of these little ones stumble, we must seek to serve them, rather than despising them.