

## Sermon 2, March 17: Children, Lost Sheep, and Forgiveness in the Church, Matthew 18

**Proposition:** As part of His fourth discourse in Matthew, Jesus teaches about life in the church, particularly telling us to love children, seek our lost brother, and forgive those who sin against us, because all of these things reflect our Father's love for children, His mission to save the lost, and His forgiveness.

- I. Children in the Church, vv. 1-10
  - A. Imitate Them. vv. 2-4
  - B. Welcome Them, v. 5
  - C. God Crushes Anyone Who Leads them to Sin, vv. 6-10
- II. The Lost One in the Church, vv. 11-20
  - A. Illustration: The Lost Sheep, vv. 11-13
  - B. Point: The Father Wills to Save Every Last Little One, v. 14
  - C. Application
    - 1. If Your Brother Is Lost, Go After Him, vv. 15-17
    - 2. Reconciliation with God Requires Reconciliation with the Church, v. 18
    - 3. God Heeds the Prayers of the Church, v. 19
    - 4. God Backs Up the Discipline of the Church, v. 20
- III. Forgiveness in the Church, vv. 21-35
  - A. Command: Forgive Without Limits, vv. 21-22
  - B. Illustration: The Unforgiving Servant, vv. 23-34
  - C. Point: No Forgiveness for the One Who Won't Forgive, v. 35

### Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, I would remind you that this morning is the second sermon in our series on Your Changing Body. Last week we saw the need for maturity from Ephesians 4. There we looked at the two things God has given us — knowledge and community, and how both bring us to maturity. This week, I want to continue looking at community. Jesus' fourth discourse in Matthew specifically addresses our life in the church, telling us what sort of community we ought to build. The community that grows us up to maturity has three major characteristics according to Jesus. In one sense, this is just an elaboration of Paul's quick summary: the Church community speaks the truth in love and connects with one another. This discourse of Jesus explains more of what it looks like to speak the truth in love, and how to stay connected in the face of sin within the community. It takes up all of ch. 18, and it leads us through the place of children in the church, why and how to go after the lost one in the church, and forgiveness in the church. Obviously we are going to have skim over this text; I'm not going to attempt to address every facet of our text this morning. But I hope

to show you that we need to love children, seek our lost brother, and forgive those who sin against us, because all of these things reflect our Father's love for children, His mission to seek the lost, and His forgiveness for us.

### **I. Children in the Church, vv. 1-10**

We begin where the Lord does, with the place of children in the church. Specifically, this discourse was triggered by the disciples' question about true greatness in the kingdom. If God looks on the heart, what does He look for? What does He want in a faithful Christian? If you had to describe the greatest American, what would you say? George Washington? Abe Lincoln? But Jesus simply takes up a child and says "This is the greatest one in the kingdom. The one with the humility of a child is the greatest in the kingdom."

#### **A. Imitate Them, vv. 2-4**

So how do we live well in the church? We live well in the church by imitating children, not with respect to their energy in charging around the church building and coloring on the walls, but with respect to their humility.

Our church has thirty or so children under the age of 12, with three of those born in the last year. You can look at one of them in the pew next to you or ahead of you right now. Children, you are the ones that the Lord Jesus sets up as the standard for what greatness in God's Kingdom looks like. The Lord says that you are humble and that we adults need to be humble like you.

Humility means thinking accurately of yourself. It involves knowing your need, your failure, your inadequacy, and also how grateful you are for your parents.

I hope that you have all come to prayer meeting and listened to the prayers of the children there. Just about every time, they spend their prayers thanking God for the people who surround them — their siblings, their parents, and the other families at the prayer meeting.

In my adult pride, I've thought "They need to learn to pray. There are so many other things to pray for that we need to cover here tonight!"

But Jesus would tell me that I need to learn from the humility that is simply enthralled by the love and gift of the body of Christ. The children are still amazed at how much God has given them in giving them all of you.

So learn the humility of a child who trusts rather than believing that he already knows it all.

#### **B. Welcome Them, v. 5**

You also need to welcome children. If our church is to be mature, it is a church where children are officially welcome. Better, it needs to be a church where children are welcome both officially and unofficially.

Officially, here's what our *Book of Church Order* says: "The children of believers are, through the covenant and by right of birth, non-communing members of the church. Hence they are entitled to Baptism, and to the pastoral oversight, instruction and government of the church, with a view to their embracing Christ and thus possessing personally all benefits of the covenant" (6-1). That's good. In fact, if you want to talk about it more, I am happy to argue with

you till the cows come home that this is a direct application and meaning of Jesus' statement "let the little children come to me, and do not forbid them." I have heard pastors say "No church membership until you're 18" and that makes my blood boil. Jesus Christ hates that attitude. He insists that we welcome children and that if we don't welcome children we reject Him.

But officially welcoming children is not enough. To be a mature church, we also need to unofficially welcome them. We need to actually love them, actually care about them, actually be glad for their presence. That doesn't mean we can't say "Children are annoying sometimes, and the older I get the harder it is for me to put up with them yelling and crying and charging about." Parents, obviously we need to help our children exercise self-discipline and have concern for our older people. But older people, you need to welcome the children. Engage a child in conversation each Sunday. After all, research has found that the single most important factor in whether a child who grows up in the church stays with the church is whether that child had meaningful relationships at church with adults other than his parents. If you are over 50, what have you done this month to show your love and care for a child in this church? Many of you give clothing. Some of you bring treats, or buy toys for the play yard. All of that is superb, and I praise God for the maturity our congregation shows in this area. But I want to challenge you to continue growing, particularly if you have not done something for the children recently. Welcome the children, officially and unofficially. Bring your children for baptism, and love the children of others — even when they are annoying, when you feel that their parents are obviously not training them as well as they should, or when they run into you. Meditate on the command of Jesus to be like the child and welcome the child. Greatness in the Kingdom is not measured by how old and stiff you are, but by how humble you are before God.

### **C. God Crushes Anyone Who Leads them to Sin, vv. 6-10**

Jesus goes on to say something absolutely scathing about anyone who would tempt a little one to sin. He says "Woe to you" to the Pharisees, but this is the only time in the gospels that He threatens a specific physical punishment and then adds "Actually, that punishment is way nicer than what I'm really going to do to the one who leads a child to sin."

Brothers and sisters, God forbid that you lead a child astray in the life of this church. God forbid that you create the kind of hostile environment that leads someone to grow up and say "My childhood church was awful. I left the faith because of what so-and-so did to me and said to me at church." I'm talking about criticism, provoking a child to anger. I'm talking about letting them have unfettered and unfiltered access to the Internet where all kinds of horrible temptations await. I'm talking about shaming them. I'm not saying that this happens here, but in many churches, the pastor's children undergo pressures and questions and expectations that make them hate the church. I just read in a book the other day about a congregation where the pastor's children were asked about their allowances because the congregation was trying to figure out whether the pastor's family was making too much and giving too much money to their children. Thank God no one here is doing that. Jesus warns you to never even think about it.

### **II. The Lost One in the Church, vv. 11-20**

Well, we hasten onward from Jesus' words about the little ones in the church, and temptations to sin in general, to His teaching about what to do with the lost ones in the church.

### **A. Illustration: The Lost Sheep, vv. 11-13**

The Lord begins with an illustration: when one sheep is lost, the good shepherd does not prioritize the greatest good of the greatest number. He prioritizes the lost one. David was accused of having left the few sheep in the wilderness — a charge that Jesus would gladly admit! He tells us plainly that the good shepherd leaves the 99 and goes after the one. What does that look like practically? He's about to tell us in the next few verses. Let me just say that it does not look like the pastor spending all his time doing marriage counseling so that he has no sermon on Sunday and just cancels worship. It doesn't look like the pastor saying to his children, "The demands of ministry are such that I'm not likely to see you much this year, or next year either."

### **B. Point: The Father Wills to Save Every Last Little One, v. 14**

Well, the point is that God the Father is utterly opposed to the loss of a single little one. That gives us great hope and confidence about aborted babies, for instance. We know that the Father does not want to lose a single one of them. That gives us good hope for our own children. God does not want them to be lost to Satan.

Some children are hurt badly and become very evil. But in a very important sense, that is not God's will at all. That is not what He wanted. He wants all men and especially all children to be saved. And He wants that same attitude He has to live in your heart.

### **C. Application**

Now, how does Jesus apply the parable of the lost sheep to us? What does it look like? It looks like this:

#### **1. If Your Brother Is Lost, Go After Him, vv. 15-17**

If your brother is sinning, go after him. You have heard Christians throw around the term "Matthew 18." When they say that, they're not talking about the guardian angels of v. 10. They're not talking about the torturers and the unforgiving servant of vv. 23 onward. They are specifically talking about the rules for conflict management here in vv. 15-17. When Christians say "Matthew 18," they mean "When you have something against someone, go tell him directly in private and see if you can be reconciled." Jesus speaks of "gaining your brother." That is the goal of this process. You are trying to regain your brother— that is, to have a restored relationship in which you have completely forgiven him and he has totally repented of the way in which he wronged you.

That's what leaving the 99 and going after the one means. It means being willing to confront someone when you are out of fellowship in the effort to restore that fellowship by forgiving on one side and repenting on the other. It means saying "Even though it's more comfortable to hang out with the 99 with whom I'm getting along, it is my responsibility as a Christian to attempt to find reconciliation with the one who is sinning against me."

That involves speaking privately with the offender first. As we all know, that means not going first to your mom, or your best friend, or your drinking buddies, or your spouse, but to the

one with whom you have the problem. If that doesn't work, bring another witness, either a witness of the original offense or of your attempts at reconciliation. And finally, if the offender utterly refuses to be reconciled, you can and should have the elders solemnly warn him that his behavior, his refusal to repent, is going to keep him out of heaven. That's what church discipline — a solemn expulsion from the body here on earth that symbolizes a solemn expulsion from heaven above.

## **2. Reconciliation with God Requires Reconciliation with the Church, v. 18**

The cryptic words here mean at least this: Reconciliation with God requires reconciliation with the church. There are a lot of people in Gillette who will tell you that they are good Christians but that they don't like the church and don't want to be part of any of the actual churches here. They insist that staying out of church does not harm them the least bit, that they are fully in fellowship with Him even though they don't like His bride a bit.

I think you all know that this doesn't work. In fact, the Lord says that when the church acts to close the door to heaven on the fingers of the unrepentant, God Almighty agrees with that. There is no reconciliation to God without reconciliation to the church. Loving Jesus and hating His bride — and His body — simply doesn't work.

If our church is to be mature, we need to recognize this and act on it. We need to go after the one so that we can be fully reconciled to the 99: to our own church, the church at large, and the Lord of the church.

## **3. God Heeds the Prayers of the Church, v. 19**

The Lord adds that God heeds the prayers of the church. The mature church prays, and especially prays for reconciliation when someone in the body is going after the one.

## **4. God Backs Up the Discipline of the Church, v. 20**

God is present in the midst of even a congregation of two or three. Where do we meet with Him? He never says "I am in the national forest on Sunday morning. I am in the tree stand. I am in the boat with a fishing pole." He says "I am where my people gather in my name." If you gather in the name of elk hunting, He's not there — not in the special way He is present in the gathered church. To grow up as a church is to recognize and enjoy and make use of our unique privilege of having Jesus in our midst when we gather and particularly when we gather to go after the one.

## **III. Forgiveness in the Church, vv. 21-35**

Well, say your brother offends you and you rebuke him for it. Peter wants to know what you should do if he repents! We tend to ask what to do about the one who doesn't repent. But Peter and Jesus are more interested in what to do about the one who does repent.

### **A. Command: Forgive Without Limits, vv. 21-22**

Jesus tells us that we must forgive that person without limits. Now, the text doesn't get into this here, but the one who does not repent cannot be fully forgiven. You can have an attitude of forgiveness, but the action of forgiveness is only complete when the sinner repents and turns away from his sin. Doug Wilson compares it to wrapping up the present of forgiveness and dropping it on your enemy's front porch. You are not holding a grudge; you are not bitter. But the

forgiveness is not complete until your enemy opens the door and unwraps the present. Then there is true reconciliation. But even without true reconciliation, you can and should be free from bitterness.

Peter assumes that he will be the one doing all the forgiving. He doesn't seem to realize that as the gospel narrative progresses, he is actually going to be the one who needs to be forgiven.

**B. Illustration: The Unforgiving Servant, vv. 23-34**

That's the secret of this parable. You and I are like the unforgiving servant, not the king. The king does all the forgiving in the parable. We seem to think we are the king. We aren't. We are most frequently like the unforgiving servant. God has forgiven you and me an impossibly large amount of sin, and yet we insist on our right to be bitter and unforgiving toward someone who once served us burnt toast or who once backed into our car and won't pay to fix it.

As the parable makes clear, there is absolutely no comparison between the amount God has forgiven you and the amount you are called to forgive in others. One hundred denarii is one six hundred thousandth of 10k talents. Jesus is saying that God has forgiven you at least six hundred thousand times as much sin as you are being called on to forgive in someone else.

Maturity in the church means that you must have a forgiving attitude toward everyone who wrongs you. Maturity in the church means that you can rely on your brothers and sisters to forgive you. You can approach them asking for forgiveness because you rely on the grace of Christ, who forgives six hundred thousand times as much sin as you and I ever will.

**C. Point: No Forgiveness for the One Who Won't Forgive, v. 35**

But the point of the parable is troubling. There is absolutely no forgiveness for the one who won't forgive. Jesus is adamant on this point. There is forgiveness for everything in Him — everything except unforgiveness, for unforgiveness is something that God will not allow. If you are going to receive Jesus' pardon, you must extend it to others. The only condition of salvation is that you freely share it. If you're going to insist on keeping it all to yourself, you will be damned.

So let's be mature in church. Let's welcome children, officially and unofficially. Let's go after the one even when it's scary. Let's forgive the one we have to go after, and forgive those who go after us and accuse us of wronging them! This Easter, remember that you are raised with Christ and need to be growing up to the measure of the stature of His fullness. He is yours, and you are His. Live like it. Amen.