

Introduction

“A king’s wrath is like the growling of a lion, but his favor is like dew on the grass.” Now that’s a saying you don’t hear every day. It is actually one of the proverbs from scripture. It’s Proverbs 19:12. It declares, “A king’s wrath is like the growling of a lion, but his favor is like dew on the grass.” In other words, a king can be a cause for great fear and alarm or he can be the means of comfort and assurance. It all depends on whether you are an object of his wrath or an object of his favor. This is the way it is in the kingdom of heaven. The children of God are objects of his favor who experience the soft assuring dew on the grass of their hearts, but those who threaten God’s children are objects of wrath who hear the lion’s roar. In this morning’s text, Jesus gives us insight into the love of his Father for his children. Out of that love comes the soothing dew of God’s favor upon them and a loud growl toward their enemies. We hear the lion roar and we see the dew fall.

[Read Scripture and Pray]

I have come to love Matthew 18. It is a unified discourse centered on the theme of God’s children. It depicts the kingdom as a family of children with God as their loving father. Every single one is important. And there are guidelines for how they are to behave toward one another. We will get into that in the coming weeks. But this morning we are going to see the deep love of God for the little ones who enter the kingdom.

Paul highlights the fact that the citizens of the kingdom are children of God. He points out that all that are led by the Spirit of God are sons (or children) of God. The Spirit of God is the Spirit of adoption by which we cry Abba! Father! The Spirit bears witness with our spirits that we are children of God. Nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. John urges Christ’s followers to “see what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God, and so we are.” Christians are God’s children and dearly loved. This remarkable love of God is characterized by Jesus in our text. Here are five aspects of a love that will not let go.

For the children of God, His love is

I. A Love that Owns (5)

A. "Whoever receives one such child in my name," says Jesus, "receives me." This is a remarkable statement especially in light of the context. He just stated that only people who come like children will enter the kingdom and that the even the greatest in the kingdom of heaven is a humble child.

A humble childlike faith recognizes its spiritual poverty and acknowledges it has nothing of its own to claim. Its meekness and gentleness confess that it possesses no beauty or attractiveness of its own. From a worldly perspective this person cannot be loved because they are unlovely. But here is a mind-boggling assurance for those who come to God like this. You are loved by God and loved by Christ. He is unashamed of his children.

That is what Jesus is teaching here. He openly and intimately identifies with his children. "When it comes to these little ones, whoever receives one (even one) of them in my name receives ME." In other words to welcome one of them is to welcome Jesus. "You receive my children, you receive me." It's like when Jesus said, if you have done unto one of the least of these my brethren you have done it unto me. Jesus is so identified with you that when people deal with you, they are dealing with him. His love for his people is so real, so intense, so personal, that what others do to them, they do to him. When Jesus stopped the great persecutor of the church, Saul of Tarsus, he asked him, "Why are you persecuting me?" Jesus so loves and owns the church as his own that to persecute the church is to persecute him. To welcome or receive one of his is to welcome him.

B. The statement Jesus makes assures every last one of us who are his people that every single one of us matters to him. He loves us each and every single one, particularly. To receive ONE such child is to receive him.

C. Jesus does not love from a distance. And he loves in such a way that no one of his people falls through the cracks. The world has its favorites. And people who know the right people receive special treatment. It is enough to make the rest of us feel that we do not really matter, that we are more of a nuisance than anything else to be put up with by the people who really matter. Everyone struggling for significance in the world thinks they have

to stand out from the crowd to be appreciated. The human struggle is often a struggle not to get overlooked or undervalued. But Jesus assures his people that though they are all children, not one of them is overlooked by the One who really matters.

D. This is not a love of which to be proud. You didn't earn this! You did not merit this! It is a love for which to be humbly grateful. It is a love that should drive you to worship and honor the one who loves you like this. It is also a love after which to model your own love. Love not because of what people do for you, but just love them. Period.

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II. A Love That Defends (6-7)

A. We encounter in this text a loud roar from a ferocious lion. The wording is among the strongest biblical expressions of judgement. It would be better for whoever causes one of these little ones to sin for that one to "have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea." Such vengeance is brutal and fearful, and it is final. When the Lord tells us not to take our own vengeance but leave it to the wrath of God, it is not so those who deserve punishment will get off scot free. God is just and God knows the measure of judgment that fits the crime. And he will bring it to bear.

It is a foolish idea that we think we can do a better job of administering justice than God. As far as it is possible, we are to live peaceably with people, and we are to leave justice to the holy administrator of justice.

B. One of the crimes that he will punish with utmost severity is the crime of persuading his people to sin. Temptation is the work of God's worst adversaries. Satan tempted Adam and Eve and drew them away. He tempted Jesus in the wilderness. He tempted Job. He sought to sift Simon Peter as wheat. He wants to pulverize you by getting you to disobey God.

People do this too. It takes place two ways I can think of. First there is the out-and-out attempt to lure others into sinful activity. The world is astonished when people do not join in their flood of debauchery, and it maligns them for not doing so. But they will give account to him who is

ready to judge the living and the dead. It is this very principle that leads Paul to exhort Christians whose faith is strong not to put a stumbling block in the way of a brother whose faith is weak.

A second way people tempt is through exasperation and provoking. This is the way the scribes and Pharisees put Jesus to the test when they tried to trick him and put him in seemingly impossible situations with their arguments. Push, push, push. Pick, pick, pick. Nag, nag, nag.

C. Temptation is an attempt to damn people to hell, to destroy them, and to destroy the reputation of God. And God will bring judgment on those who do this to his people. He is a just and vengeful God. This word comes across as a warning to the world to leave his people alone or pay the price. It also teaches God's own children the hatred God has for sin and trying to lure people into it. Woe to the world, says Jesus, for temptations to sin. God does not tempt. He despises temptation. And he will bring judgment on the one by whom temptation comes.

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III. A Love That Warns (8-9)

A. In the context of dealing drastically with temptations to sin, Jesus warns his own followers to deal drastically in their own lives with this mortal enemy. God does not tempt us to sin but each person is tempted when they are drawn away by their own evil desire, and when desire is gratified, sin is the result, and death is the result of sin. And so Jesus gives us the same kind of brute-force language here that he used about the ones who tempt others to sin. Here we are the ones who need to use this mighty resolve and absolute determination. As surely as God will brutally judge those who tempt his children, his children should deal brutally with whatever in themselves leads them into sin. The message is to do whatever is necessary to stop sinning or go to hell. If necessary, cut off your hand or your foot. If necessary, pluck out your eye. But take drastic action to stem the acts and thoughts, motives and attitudes which constitute defiance against God.

B. Everything God commands is good. Everything that violates those commands is evil, and as evil, it is destructive. It brings forth death. It

destroys joy and peace. In this context Jesus is reinforcing to us that it is love that motivates God to give us his commands and it is love, his amazing love for little children, that moves God to warn us strongly to forsake sin and to undo every provision for the flesh, and thus to escape the destruction of hell.

C. The application is graphic. Get rid of everything in your life that is a contributing factor to sin. Set up boundaries. Make no provision for the flesh. In fact make "unprovisions" for the flesh. Do you need to drive a few extra minutes out of the way to stay away from temptation? Do you need to get rid of a ps-4? Do you need to put protective software on your computer? Do you need added accountability to make sure you pursue godly patterns and words? Do what it takes! The love of God, this love that is glad to own you and protect you is speaking to you to warn you. Hear his kind voice!

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IV. A Love that Commands Love (10-11)

A. Jesus continues talking about the little ones in verse 10, and he addresses the disciples: "See that YOU do not despise one of these little ones." The little ones are the children in the kingdom. YOU refers to the disciples to whom he was talking. So Jesus is laying down the standard for life among the children in the kingdom. We are to despise sin, but we are not to despise one another. In other words, love one another. The love with which God loves his children and with which Jesus loves those in his kingdom is a love that expects, requires, and prescribes love among the brothers and sisters, love among the children. Each child is supposed to love the other children in God's family.

You can say you love the Lord's church, but that love is put to the test whenever one of the children acts out against you. The wording here is to alert us that there is never a situation among the children of God that we have a right or a good reason to despise. A friend loves at all times. Love is patient. Love is kind. It is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful.

Love is central to what it means to be a child of God. This point is a strong concern of John in his first epistle. He writes, "Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling." Paul writes the Roman believers, "Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor." The love we have for one another in the body is a reflection of God's love for us and a recognition of how deeply that love has affected us. Let us love in word and deed and truth.

B. God is totally serious about his instruction that believers love one another. Jesus communicates the command not to despise one of these little ones with a most solemn warning: "For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven."

Before us is one of those places in Scripture that reminds us that we do not live in a purely natural world. There is a natural realm and there is a supernatural realm. There is a dimension of what is seen, and there is another dimension of what is unseen but every bit as real as the seen. To walk by faith is to live by the truths and realities we do not see as well as the ones we do see. People make grave errors in rejecting the unseen but very real world of the supernatural. It is notable to me that New York is the one state by far hardest hit by the coronavirus. I have no doubt that among all the variables involved, one of them is supernatural. It was January 2019, barely a year ago, when the state of New York reached a new low by passing legislation that allows abortions even up until the baby's due date. And the state legislature celebrated the legislation as though the Jets had won the Super Bowl. Now the governor of that state tells us that God had nothing to do with "flattening the curve" in that state. He is treading on dangerous ground. And that is putting it mildly.

Angels are real. They may temporarily take on physical form, but they inhabit the unseen spiritual realm. Hebrews 1:14 teaches us that angels are "ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation." Angels serve God by ministering to God's children. They are always beholding the face of God the Father, constantly ready to be dispatched by him to render aid for the sake of his children. The material in

this statement does not support the idea that every person has his or her own guardian angel. Rather, God the Father is the guardian and all the angels are constantly ready to render aid to the children of God at His behest.

The point is two-fold. First, we are all put on notice in most solemn fashion. The failure to love the little ones of God invites supernatural repercussions. God sees and he is ready to dispatch angels to defend his people. Second, God loves his children this much. He cares so much for every single one of his children that he will bless those who love one another and deal decisively with those who do not. His angels are poised and ready, always beholding the face of God. They await any instruction to go and deal with human behavior that lacks love for his little ones.

Here is assurance for you if you are a child of God and warning to everyone for unloving behavior towards the children of God. Love one another. For whoever abides in love abides in God. But if anyone says, "I love God but hates his brother, he is a liar; and God will take vengeance.

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V. A Love That Holds Us Fast (12-14)

A. Jesus provides a touching word picture. A man with 100 sheep will go after even a single sheep which has wandered away. He is more intent on restoring a wayward sheep than remaining with those who have not gone astray. And if he finds the wayward sheep, his joy in restoring that sheep to the fold is greater than the joy of those who did not go astray. Jesus is not telling us to be wayward so that we can provide joy to the heart of God, but he is assuring us that if we have wandered, the Lord himself is coming after us. He will not resist us if we turn back.

The Lord is depicted as an earnest lover of his sheep. He vigorously pursues the restoration of the one who wanders. He will not give them up; he will not let them go. The point, says Jesus, is this. "It is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that ONE of these little ones should perish." He will not let it happen. They may wander, but he will not let them go. It is true of every single one!!

B. What an assuring thing to place right here in the text! We have heard the lion growl, but now we feel the soothing dew upon the grass. Think about it. Jesus has just sternly warned his own disciples that they must come as children to get into the kingdom. He has warned them of the terrible consequences for those who tempt his little ones. He has indicated the eternal danger of giving in to temptation. Sin results in hell for people who do it. So serious is it when people sin that it is better to cut off parts of their body, if necessary, to stop doing it. His children must love like he loves. How hard is that! You might begin to think that if you have sinned, there is no hope for you. You want to return. You want to be restored, but will he have you back? Would God welcome you again into the fold? And Jesus' answer is this: not only will he have you back. If you are truly his child by faith in Jesus Christ, He will not let you go!!!

This for me is one of the great and precious assurances of the scripture, and if you belong to him it is for you as well. God is such a loving and caring God that he will hold his people fast. Prone to wander, yes. Prone to sin, yes. Prone to leave the God I love, yes. But only to be left in despair where I have wandered? NO!!! No!! Pursued by a shepherd whose heart is crushed that one of his sheep is missing.

In the Old Testament we have a beautiful picture of this reality in the prophet Hosea. The Lord tells Hosea to go and marry a wife from harlotry. He wants to show his people what they are like. They are like the harlot. They are unfaithful and they wander. He depicts his people as an adulterous wife. Hosea writes, "She has played the whore . . . has acted shamefully. For she said, 'I will go after my lovers who give me my bread and my water, my wool and my flax, my oil and my drink.'"

But here is the Lord's response. "I will hedge up her way with thorns, and I will build a wall against her, so that she cannot find her paths. She shall pursue her lovers but not overtake them, and she shall seek them, but shall not find them. Then she shall say, 'I will go and return to my first husband, for it was better for me then than now.' And she did not know that it was I who gave her the grain, the wine, and the oil, and who lavished on her silver and gold." The Lord says he will discipline her. But later he says, "I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her.

And there I will give her vineyards and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope, and there she shall answer as in the days of her youth." God is a pursuing God. His people may wander, but he will hold them fast. He went so far as sending his only son to die for them, and he will not let them go.

A more recent hymn expresses this precious truth:
When I fear my faith will fail, Christ will hold me fast
When the tempter would prevail, he will hold me fast
I could never keep my hold through life's fearful path
For my love is often cold, he must hold me fast.

Those he saves are His delight; Christ will hold me fast
Precious in his holy sight; he will hold me fast
He'll not let my soul be lost; His promises shall last
Bought by him at such a cost, He will hold me fast

For my life he bled and died; Christ will hold me fast
Justice has been satisfied; he will hold me fast
Raised with him to endless life; he will hold me fast
'Til our faith has turned to sight, when he comes at last.

He will hold me fast. He will hold me fast.
For my Savior loves me so; he will hold me fast.

Maybe you are wandering today. Do not wander any more! Turn back. Turn back; if you will turn back, he is there to receive you. His is a love that will not let go.

What a privilege to be his child! There is no love like the love of God. And the way that we love should declare it. The way that we forgive should display it. The humility in which we walk should make it abundantly clear that we are totally amazed by the depth of the Father's love for us.

Conclusion

The very one speaking to these disciples is the guarantee of the profound love of God. He who did not spare his own son, how will he not with him freely give us all things? How will he not be steadfast in his love.

Followers of Jesus, marvel afresh in the steadfast love of God in Christ Jesus. Those of you watching this morning who have not yet come to faith in Christ, you do not know love. The God who formed this universe is the God who sent his son to pay the penalty of human sin. He did it for love. He demonstrates his own love in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us. Ours is the sin against him. His is the perfect provision for forgiveness of that sin, for reconciliation with him, and for the hope of glory when all things will be made new and we will behold him eternally in his glory. But you must turn from a heart of defiance against God. You must turn and become like a child who completely depends upon his provision for you. That provision is Jesus. You must abandon your heart and life of sin against him and trust in Jesus who lived a perfect life, died a wrath-satisfying death, and was raised a conquering king to bless and reign over all who come to him for love and life. The love offered by this world is a curse compared with the love of God in Christ Jesus. Do not miss out on it.