

## The Love That Seeks

How would you illustrate greatness? What example would you use? If we wanted to teach someone about greatness we might choose some great leader from the stage of world history. Someone like Alexander **the Great**. Or Ghengis Khan. Or Napoleon. Or Winston Churchill. Or Abraham Lincoln.

But Jesus, the smartest man who ever lived, the wisest man who ever lived, when he wanted to illustrate greatness didn't choose someone **great**. He chose someone **small**, a child, an unnamed and unknown child.

I remember another time and place, a man and a child. The man was considered to be great, if not the greatest man in the world at the time. He was the president of the United States of America, thought by many, mainly Americans, to be the greatest nation on earth. And the child was his son. The American president was John Kennedy; his son was John, Jr. The two were immortalized in one of the most poignant pictures in American history.

There's a big difference between a mature adult and a small child. Or is there? Jesus is saying that the greatest adult and the smallest child can have something in common, something very important. They are alike, or can be. Jesus tells his disciples, then and now, **Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of the heavens. Therefore whoever takes a humble place—becoming like this child—is the greatest in the kingdom of the heavens** (Matthew 18:3-4). Grown men and women, if they want to enter God's kingdom of the heavens, must humble themselves like little children.

What Jesus is saying is that you and I must get under the desk.

This week I saw a commercial where a man said, "Everyone knows that bigger is better." I can't remember what was being advertised, but it doesn't really matter. Because according to Jesus bigger is not necessarily better.

Jesus refers six times in these verses to the microi, "**little ones**." Who are these little ones? Are they the children? No; Jesus uses a child to illustrate what an adult must become—a child again. So the little ones aren't children. They're grownups.

But more specifically they're **the insignificant ones**. They're the ones that don't have many talents. They're the ones who don't have a very high-paying job and therefore can't give very much to the church. Or maybe they don't have a job at all. They're the ones who're not very attractive. Not very smart. Not very industrious. They're the ones who talk too loud and when they do open their mouth, they often say the wrong thing. They may even smell bad. And worst of all, they may be the ones not following Jesus as closely as we are. These insignificant ones.

These little ones are among us. How then should we treat them? In verse 10 Jesus says, **See that you do not despise one of these little ones**.

There are so many people in the world. More than 6.7 billion. Do you know how many just **one** billion is? One billion is a thousand millions. Just a single billion looks like this: 1,000,000,000. A one followed by nine zeroes. And there are more than 6.7 billion on planet earth today.

Have you ever wondered how many people populated the world in Jesus' time? The U.S. Census Bureau has estimated that the world population in A.D. 1 was 200 million. That was the population of just the United States in 1968.

These 6.7 billion live on seven continents. Sociologists have distinguished groups of people by race or skin color. Different peoples have skin that varies in pigmentation from very dark to very light. The organization Ethnologue estimates that these 6.7 billion people speak over 6,800 different languages.

We tend to organize people into groups by race or sex or language or nationality or political affiliation or religion or some other factor. It helps us to distinguish between individuals.

In fact, every one of the earth's 6.7 billion people is unique. No one person is exactly like another. We don't have enough unique names to identify all these 6.7 billion so more than one person has the same name.

On USA People Search I typed in my name, Merrill S. Williams. It came up with over 100 people with that name, including me. But no one else in the world is exactly like me, not even my twin brother.

For decades fingerprints were used to distinguish one person from another. In the late 20th century scientists developed a more precise way to distinguish one person from another. They used human DNA. No two people have the same DNA. Scientific evidence only proves what we already knew, each human being is unique. There is no one else exactly like you in the world.

In Matthew 18 there is one word that is significant. It's the word **one**. It occurs 11 times. What a difference there is between one billion and just one. Jesus warns us not to despise even one of these insignificant ones.

What does it mean to **despise** someone? To regard them with contempt, distaste, disgust, or disdain; it is, I guess you could say it is to "dis" them. But that we must not do. We must open our minds and hearts to them. Do you know why? Because God's heart is open to them. **Their angels in the heavens always see the face of my Father in the heavens** (Matthew 18:10). I don't know why the translators didn't translate this word correctly. It's not "heaven," but "the heavens." That's where the angels are, that's where God is, in the heavens. In the air, in the atmosphere, in the very space around our bodies. He's that close, all the time. God fills and overflows space. Hallelujah!

What about these angels? We find angels in Daniel as representatives of nations. We see them again in Revelation as representatives of churches. Here we see them representing the little people, the insignificant ones.

Angels are not the main characters in Scripture, but neither are they insignificant beings. Some people think that every child has their own guardian angel. But Jesus is not here talking about children; he's talking about adults. And if every child has their own guardian angel, then some of them must not have been very good at their job. Children have been horribly abused, even killed.

But apparently angels do show special concern for the little ones, those despised by the world. "Always see the face of" is a phrase from a king's court. It means they are always close to the king. And by extension so are those they represent, the little ones. Frederick Dale Bruner says that "we are making the wrong enemies when we look down on insignificant people" (p. 642).

But of all that could be said about these little ones, Jesus lifts out one of their faults. But he doesn't just tell his disciples what it is; he shows them, in a word picture. **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?** What characteristic of these insignificant ones is Jesus emphasizing? **Wandering**. The word used gives us our English word, *planet* meaning "a wandering one." These little ones are wanderers. But Jesus doesn't compare them to planets. They wander, he says, like sheep.

Philip Keller was a shepherd in South Africa. He tells about a female sheep he had in his flock. She was one of the most attractive ewes he ever owned. She was beautifully proportioned and had a thick coat of wool. The lambs she bore were strong and matured quickly.

But in spite of all she had going for her, she had a single fault that nullified all her good points. She was a wanderer. Keller called her a fence crawler. She was never satisfied to stay in her own pasture. She was always seeking other pastures. She wandered so much that he came to call her Mrs. Gad-about.

Keller's ranch was along the sea. And Mrs. Gad-about was always looking for an opening in the fence or along the shoreline to crawl through so she could feed in someone else's pasture. It wasn't that Keller didn't provide lush grass for her to eat; he did. By her wandering she would often end up feeding in a dry, barren pasture. Mrs. Gad-about lived up to her name. She was a wanderer.

"Wanders" here really means, "is wandering away." The wandering is not intentional. The sheep has no destination in mind. But she just wanders seeking the greenest pastures, the easiest path. And gets farther and farther away from the shepherd. Until she is in danger, until her life is in jeopardy.

We usually think of the lost as those who've never known the Lord. But here Matthew is not talking about people who've not yet begun following Jesus. He's talking about disciples. These little, insignificant ones, are disciples. That's clear from verse 6, **If anyone causes one of these little ones—those who believe in**

**me—to stumble...** They believe in him, albeit it weakly. They follow him, albeit it casually. They love him, albeit half-heartedly.

In the church there are wanderers. They never seem to be satisfied to feed on the pasture that the Lord has provided. They're always looking for something else to satisfy the longing of their hearts, something other than the Lord.

So what are we to do with these insignificant ones, these wanderers? We're to go after them and bring them back to the fellowship of the church. That's what the shepherd does. He has a flock of 100 sheep. Ninety-nine of them are content to stay with the flock, close to the shepherd. Only one of them wanders. But that one is so important to him that he will leave all 99 and go seeking that single disciple.

It only makes sense, doesn't it? The 99 are safe, content and well cared for. But the one is not; he's in crisis. He's the one, the only one, who needs help, who needs the shepherd's attention. And since the shepherd is responsible for all the sheep, he leaves the 99 who are not in jeopardy and goes after the one who is.

Now let me ask you, *Is that wandering sheep lost?* Yes and no. Wandering disciples are lost but not lost to Jesus. He knows where they are. But they're lost in relation to him. So if and when the shepherd finds his lost sheep, it's not really him finding them; it's them finding him. We sometimes speak of "finding the Lord." I guess that's true—we do in some sense find him. But really he's the one who finds us. He sought us long before we sought him. He's still seeking us, no matter how far we wander.

And when he finds the wanderer, how does it make him feel? It makes him glad. In fact **he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off** (Matthew 18:13). Does that mean that he loves the one more than the 99? No, but he is thrilled that the one was found. After all, it was the one who was lost. But if any of the 99 were lost or all of them, he would be just as happy.

So it is with our Father in the heavens and wandering disciples. **In the same way your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish** (Matthew 18:14).

Perish. What does it mean to perish? In common use it means to die. But when Jesus uses the term he means that but much more. In the most well-known verse in the Bible says, **For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life** (John 3:16). Here perish is put in contrast to eternal life. They are in fact opposites, eternal life and perishing. Every person will experience either one or the other.

To perish is to die physically. But it's also to die spiritually. To perish is to die outside the Shepherd's fold. In fact, persons living outside the Shepherd's flock are already dead. Their physical death confirms and finalizes their spiritual death. To perish is to die outside the fold and go to hell. Hell, pastor? That's kind of harsh, isn't it? Surely our loving Father would never send a wanderer to hell. You're right, he wouldn't. But some will go there by their own choice. Or maybe more accurately, by their failure to choose, to choose to return to the flock.

Jesus and the Father love the insignificant ones, the wanderers, and seek them, always. And they expect us to do the same. They warn us against despising them. God is not willing that any of these little ones should perish. In other words, it's not his will. He wills, he wants them all to be found and brought back into the fold.

But as they wander, they place themselves in eternal jeopardy. Someone may wander all their life, but if they're wandering when their life comes to an end, they will perish. They will be lost, forever in hell.

So the possibility exists that these little ones, these insignificant ones, these wanderers will perish. The phrase, **"if he finds it"** in verse 13 reveals much. That little word "if" has such large implications. It's a word of contingency. "If" means something may or may not happen. Whether it happens or not depends on other factors. The shepherd may or may not find the wandering sheep. Whether he does nor not depends on other factors. Mostly on whether the sheep wants to be found. Will God find the wanderer and bring him back to the flock? Maybe.

Did you know that this little parable appears again in the New Testament? In Luke chapter 15. The parable appears there almost exactly as it does here. Almost. But there's a one-word difference. Here Jesus says "if." There he says "until." Here, **if** the shepherd finds the sheep. There **until** he finds the sheep. That

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word “until” tells us something important. It emphasizes the Father’s persistence in seeking the wandering one until he finds them. He’s not going to give up. He loves them so much that he will pursue them as long as they live.

People are like sheep in so many ways. But there’s one major difference between the two. Sheep have no free will. People do. Sheep cannot resist the shepherd’s care. People can. And do. Some wanderers refuse to be led back into the fellowship. And God treats us as persons. He respects us. He will never force us to do something we don’t want to do.

One of these little ones may perish. But it’s not what the Father wants. He wants so much for them to be found and returned to the fellowship of the church. And he wants us to not despise them, not even one of them.

Is there someone you’re tempted to despise? Maybe you have despised them. Does someone’s face come to mind? Then repent of that despising, ask the Father to forgive you and determine not to despise the insignificant ones.